

"You chaps mustn't worry when you come back":

Cape Town soldiers and aspects of the
experience of war and demobilisation

1939-1953

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Submitted in fulfilment of
the requirements of an MA
degree in the Department of History
at the University of Cape Town

May 1995

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the assistance of many people this project would have never taken shape. I am indebted to several people from the University of Cape Town for their commentary, supervision, advice and guidance. In particular I must thank Bill Nasson for his supervision and insightful comments, Lance van Sittert and Vivian Bickford-Smith for their aid during Bill's official leave and for employment throughout my studies. It is largely due to them that I have been able to continue my studies this far.

The research itself depended upon a substantial oral component: the assistance and time offered by a large group of total strangers - the veterans who volunteered (repeatedly) to be interviewed and to provide personal material in the form of photographs, diaries and other memorabilia of their time at War. Their generosity has at all times been a source of constant surprise, and I would like to acknowledge this before this work begins.

Finally I must thank those members of my family who have provided me with practical and emotional support during the last two years. My (South African) mother Cynthia, who not only prints and checks everything that I have written, but also puts up with the difficulties that having a student for a son-in-law creates, and my beloved wife Michelé, for her editing assistance, for giving me the idea for this dissertation in the first place, for three

years of constancy in the face of hardship, and for providing emotional and financial support throughout. Besides all this she also seems to produce the most beautiful babies every time I have to write a thesis. These children, Zoë and Julian, have been a source of constant joy, and I know they will continue to be so. Without my family, and Michelé in particular, I would never have been in a position to write anything.

ABSTRACT

Very little scholarly work has been written about Cape Town during the Second World War. Indeed, very little has been written about South African society at all during this period. This study is an attempt to contribute towards scholarly discussion of the effects of war on South African society, and to try to understand the largely neglected effects of the War on those who took part in it.

Much of this study focuses on the experiences of white English-speaking veterans. This is because the majority of soldiers fighting in the Second World War were from this particular population group, and also because it was this group that was about to lose commanding political influence upon its return to South Africa. A central theme of this study is the government's neglect of the returning soldiers, and their failure to live up to their promises. The change of government in 1948 was to ensure that the needs of the ex-volunteers were never fully addressed, and that the veterans would never occupy the central position in society which they thought was their right, having fought in a war which many members of the new government had opposed.

The focus on Cape Town also ensures that this study remains separate from the many papers which have been written detailing the rise of Nationalism from the late 1930s until the 1948 election. Looking at the other side of the political spectrum -

at the eventual losers - has important and interesting political and historical implications, and adds a new dimension to the political history of the period.

The methodology used for this study is mainly oral - interviews were conducted with a small representative sample of veterans and have provided a basis for all secondary research. Using the testimony of veterans has proved a useful and original tool for examining the period in question. One further aim of the thesis is to provide an opportunity for the voices of the veterans to be recognised as an authoritative resource about the history of Cape Town during the War and in the immediate post-War period.

The thesis is split into two parts to reflect the different nature of Cape Town society during and after the War. The early part deals with Cape Town during the War and the changes which were taking place there as a result of South African participation in the conflict. This section also examines the wartime experiences of the soldiers and assesses how these experiences helped to forge new identities and behaviour after the War. Part Two looks at the post-War period and the demobilisation process, examining how it treated and prejudiced the soldiers who were involved.

NOTE ON SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Much of the information for this dissertation comes from a series of interviews conducted in 1994 with veterans of the Second World War. Because the central theme of the thesis is the experiences of ex-soldiers upon their return to society, these interviews were vital to the study, and have formed the main body of sources consulted.

Information given in the interviews was often used as a starting point for a line of research, both secondary and primary, which is also included in the thesis. While a range of printed resources was used, it is important to bear in mind the central role that oral testimony played in the production of this thesis.

While the use of interviews in historical writing is becoming more common in South Africa, debates about the nature of such history, and the theoretical aspects of interviewing and analysis are still relatively thin on the ground. Most important in this regard is Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng*¹, which has valuable theoretical insights into the workings of oral history. These insights are largely specific to the type of interviews which she was conducting, however, and can be of little assistance to those working outside rural African communities. Bozzoli's interviews were also largely conducted by a third party, which establishes a very different dynamic to those extant

¹ B. Bozzoli with M. Nkotose - *Women of Phokeng* (Johannesburg, 1991)

in the interviews undertaken for this work.

A recent paper by Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool² has also tried to question the nature of oral material gathered in South Africa, challenging the view that oral history has the power to 'democratise ... the local historical record'³. Minkley and Rassool identify two opposing styles of historical writing, one style engaging in 'autocratic authorship', while the other is a more chaotic approach affirming hetero- and polyglossia. An evaluation is offered of 'all oral history research conducted in and about South Africa in the 1990s' in which oral historians are berated for 'collapsing' oral interviews into the 'historical realist narrative' of the former of these two camps⁴. Despite their criticisms, however, they are not able to offer any practical or theoretical solutions for those engaged in oral history. The paper, along with the work of Bozzoli and others, is important, however, for highlighting the complexity of the methodology of life history research.

During interviewing for this thesis, two distinct methods were used. Initially, interviews were conducted following a fairly

² G. Minkley and C. Rassool - 'Oral history in South Africa: some critical questions' Africa seminar paper, 22.3.95, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

³ B. Nasson - 'The oral historian and historical formation in Cape Town' in *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol 6. (Centre For African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1988) pp 17-18

⁴ G. Minkley and C. Rassool - 'Oral history' pp 8-10

standard 'life history' format. These interviews were almost completely chronological, and the informant was directed through the testimony by a series of direct questions from the interviewer. The second method used was a much more indirect approach, asking the informants only one broad question, and then reflecting their testimony back to them in the form of summaries, which acted both as a check on the material already gathered and a conversational cue, encouraging the informants to continue their narrative.

While this second method has several advantages over the life history format, in particular in the amount of control it gives the informant over the material presented during the interview, it also has its disadvantages. Several informants seemed to expect a string of direct questions to be put to them, and consequently did not respond to the unstructured nature of the 'free attitude' method, while others did not share with the interviewer the understanding that the summaries offered were conversational cues. The central role of the informant in the revealing of information in a free attitude interview also meant that information which was required for this study was not forthcoming without further prompting by the interviewer. In such cases, direct questions were asked, marking a partial return to the life history method after the unstructured section of the interview was completed. The most common scenario, then, was the

use of both methods in the course of a single interview.

Another problem faced during the interviews was the tendency of the veterans to romanticise their wartime experiences. This was especially evident during the longer sections of narrative given by the informants about events that took place during the War. The passing of fifty years between the period under discussion and this recounting of events has obviously had an effect on the way demobilisation is remembered.

The interview process was further complicated by the dynamics established by my presence. Because I am a British male, assumptions were created on the part of some informants about my political affiliations and about my attitudes to the War. This had much to do with the informants' family ties to Britain. The majority of interviews were conducted with men, and the assumptions made about my political and social status were also linked to a tendency among the informants to recreate a camaraderie akin to that experienced in the War, which assumed a 'matey' like-mindedness and mutual pro-British feeling. This was most noticeable during certain interviews where the informants swore repeatedly in an attempt to recreate the language of the War.

If these problems with the structure of the interviews are kept in mind during analysis, they need not detract from the value of the interviews as a source. The interviews provide original and interesting insights into the experiences and identities of the veterans which could not be gathered from existing source material. They also serve to allow a group of people who have remained hidden from historical research for so long to add to the body of knowledge about Cape Town in the 1940s and 1950s.

A range of printed primary sources was also consulted for this study - government commissions, City Council and Divisional Council Minutes, publications of the Directorate of Demobilisation, and the Department of Census and Statistics, to cite those most commonly used. Newspapers and contemporary popular publications were also used.

The greatest disappointment while conducting the research for this dissertation was the very restricted availability or disorganisation of the records of the Department of Social Welfare and Demobilisation. The Cape Archives has very little material from the Department, and much of it was concerned primarily with Port Elizabeth. Information on Cape Town is surprisingly thin on the ground, and therefore little use has been made of the records of the Department. This is not necessarily a weakness, however, because the study's central

focus is on experience rather than the physical conditions of demobilisation. The information that would have been most useful from the records of the Department of Social Welfare and Demobilisation is available elsewhere - the terms and conditions of demobilisation, much of the reasoning behind them, and reports on the effectiveness of the measures implemented are explained in newspapers, government publications, and the debates of the House of Assembly as well as in other sources.

PART 1: WARTIME

CHAPTER 1

**'We packed up and left and
went off with the army'⁵:**

Introduction

⁵ Interview: H.B. p 10

South Africa's participation in the Second World War came at a crucial time in the country's history. South Africa was embarking upon a phase of secondary industrial growth which would guarantee the country's prosperity after the War. Urbanisation was to accompany industrialisation as one of the main features of society both during and after the War, and the political situation was in a particularly unsettled phase.

The 'Fusion' government, which was in power until the eve of the War, was a curious mixture of the Nationalists and the South African Party, which tried to put aside their differences in an attempt to steer the country through the difficulties posed by the international situation of the early 1930s. This fragile alliance was torn apart by the advent of War. During the War, the government was led by General Smuts and his new United Party - the largest fragment of the Fusion government - while the opposition Nationalists (who had renamed themselves the Herenigde Nasionale Party, to distance themselves from the National Party that had participated in the Fusion administration) were gradually drawn towards the more radical right wing which had been gathering strength from the mid-1930s.

Most importantly, participation in the War raised questions about the political alignment of all South Africans. As O'Meara points out, 'involvement in the Second World War clearly stemmed neither

from direct internal accumulation imperatives of any branch of capitalist production nor from any specifically South African conflict with Germany'⁶. O'Meara also asserts that the majority of South Africans were against the decision to enter the War - while this claim can never be authoritatively verified⁷, it is certainly true that the decision to enter the War did give a fresh impetus to the country's burgeoning republican movement, as had participation in an imperial war in 1914. After the War, support for the Nationalists had grown to a sufficient level to carry them narrowly to power in 1948.

The War was to be a vital turning point in the political, social and economic history of twentieth-century South Africa. In the light of this it is surprising that relatively little has been written about the nature of South African society during the War, and in its immediate aftermath. The majority of writers concentrate on events up to 1939, or take 1948 as a starting point for more recent histories.

The papers that have been written specifically about the demobilisation deal mostly with the workings of the machinery

⁶ D. O'Meara - *Volkskapitalisme: class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism 1934-1948* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983) p 121

⁷ Other writers are much less direct in their treatment of this issue, most, like Davenport, state only that the decision to enter the War created a split in the country, or 'cut deep into South African public opinion'. T. Davenport - *South Africa: a modern history* (Macmillan, London, 1991) p 299

established by the government, and not with the effects the War had upon those returning to society. Most notable among these are Cock's recent History Workshop paper, 'Demobilisation and Democracy'⁸, Gibbs' thesis, 'Demobilisation after World War Two'⁹ and Oosthuizen's thesis, 'The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers After the Second World War'¹⁰. These three papers have in common an acceptance that what the government planned to happen in terms of the benefits offered to veterans, was what did happen. There is very little investigation in any of these papers into the level of implementation of the demobilisation scheme. This is particularly true in the work of Gibbs and Cock, who examine the racial discrimination in the demobilisation scheme.

There are some modern military histories of the War, which follow units, battalions or in some cases all South African troops through their campaigns¹¹. Many of these, such as Carrel's

⁸ J. Cock - 'Demobilisation and Democracy: the relevance of the 1944 'Soldier's Charter' in Southern Africa today'. Paper presented to the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 13-15 July 1994.

⁹ K. Gibbs - 'Demobilisation after World War Two' (BA (Hons) thesis, UNISA, 1990, Unpub.)

¹⁰ F. Oosthuizen - 'The demobilisation of the white Union Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War' (MA thesis, RAU, 1993, unpub.)

¹¹ The most recent notable additions to this body of writing have been the series 'South Africans at War' published by Ashanti Publishing. The books from the series that were used for this dissertation are: J.A. Brown - *The War of a Hundred Days* (Ashanti Publishing, Johannesburg, 1990) which records the activities of South African troops during the War in Abyssinia and Ethiopia; J. Crwys-Williams - *A Country at War, 1939-1945: the mood of a nation* (Ashanti Publishing, Johannesburg, 1992), a series of extracts from interviews and papers documenting life in South Africa during

*Foxes of the Desert*¹², are written by veterans themselves, and take the form of personal memoirs very similar in character to many of the narratives in the interviews conducted for this paper. Very little attention, however, has been paid to what was happening to South African society as a result of war conditions in the period 1939-1948. Indeed, works that have been written about this period in South African history, like O'Meara's *Volkskapitalisme*¹³ and Furlong's *Between Crown and Swastika*¹⁴, focus on the War period and attempt to explain the political changes that were about to take place, rather than examine the specific effects that the War was having on South African society at the time.

This thesis does fit in to the broader group of studies that have been done about the War and African societies, most notably Killinngray and Rathbone's *Africa and the Second World War*, in which several articles describe the effects of the War on society and in particular upon the structures of European colonialism

the War; I. Gleeson - *The Unknown Force: black, Indian and Coloured soldiers through two world wars* (Ashanti Publishing, Johannesburg, 1994), and; J. Kros - *War in Italy: with the South African troops from Taranto to the Alps* (Ashanti Publishing, Johannesburg, 1992)

¹² Carrel, P. - *Foxes of the Desert* (Macdonald, Johannesburg, 1960)

¹³ D. O'Meara - *Volkskapitalisme*

¹⁴ P.J. Furlong - *Between Crown and Swastika: the impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner nationalist movement in the fascist era* (University of the Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg, 1991)

throughout the continent¹⁵.

According to Martin and Orpen in their military history of the South African forces in World War Two, over 330 000 South Africans volunteered for service between 1939 and 1945¹⁶. This thesis is based on interviews with a sample of 24 white and coloured veterans, in an attempt to explore the effects of War and demobilisation on aspects of the identity of the troops returning to Cape Town.

An army is, by necessity, a very stratified organism. There are the obvious visible distinctions of rank which create two distinct classes within the forces - officers and 'other ranks' - and then several sub-divisions within those two groups. There are also further divisions among those serving: between combat and non-combatant troops, men and women, Air Force, Navy and Army, and, in the South African context, between different racial groups in their segregated units. In the first instance, an attempt was made to keep the sample of Cape Town interviewees as representative as possible of all these different divisions. The interviewees include 11 officers (2 Royal Navy, 3 Army and 6 Air Force) and 13 'other ranks' (7 Army, 2 Air Force, 3 Cape Corps

¹⁵ D. Killingray & R. Rathbone (eds) - *Africa and the Second World War* (Macmillan, London, 1986)

¹⁶ H.J. Martin & N. Orpen - *South Africa at War. South African Forces, World War II*. Vol VII (Purcell, Cape Town, 1979) p 346

and 1 Royal Navy).

The group can be split in other ways, though, which are useful in analysis. There are a total of 13 combat troops and 11 non-combat troops within the interview sample. This high percentage of non-combat troops is fairly typical of the experience of South African troops in World War Two, particularly after Tobruk when the South African forces were acting increasingly in partnership with British and Allied troops, and were supplying a growing number of second line soldiers. Other groups represented in the sample include servicewomen and prisoners of war, of which there are four each. While the sample of informants used for this thesis is small compared to the massive number of people from Cape Town who volunteered for service, all significant groups within the armed forces which came from Cape Town are represented.

The group of veterans also had very different social backgrounds prior to the conflict, which obviously had a direct bearing on their experience of demobilisation. There are fishermen, artisans, mechanics, and also others from the upper echelons of society who were educated in Britain and seemed likely to pursue careers in government or as leaders of industry. While it is impossible to give a complete biography of each interviewee here, where it is appropriate these social differences have been

highlighted.

What is most obvious from the sample is that no African veterans are included. It has proved impossible to make contact with any local African veterans. Whether this is due to the nature of Cape Town society over the past 40 years, where the majority of the region's African residents were removed, or whether the experience of War was so negative for local Africans that no veterans' organisation was formed in Cape Town, is unclear. Many of the veterans interviewed had some negative experience of demobilisation: most commonly they had difficulty readjusting to civilian society, rather than with the demobilisation machinery the government established. The very existence of the demobilisation system is evidence that the government was aware of some of the problems of rehabilitating troops into society. The nature of the demobilisation machinery also reflected the nature of the society into which the soldiers were to return: racism, class and gender inequality were part of South African society, life in the forces, and of the differential demobilisation benefits which were given to soldiers.

The troops who left South Africa to fight in the Second World War did so at a crucial point in South African history. The country was experiencing an economic transformation through the growth of secondary industry, which was to be speeded up by the War.

This economic change was to be accompanied by various social and political changes over the next few years: industrialisation, rapid urbanisation and the ambitious social engineering plans of the early apartheid regime were contemporary phenomena. Urban populations grew rapidly as people were drawn from rural areas to seek work. By the end of the War, it was accepted by the Smuts government that the urban black population had become a permanent feature of South African life.

More famously, political change was also just around the corner. By 1939, the processes which O'Meara, and others such as Bunting¹⁷, have outlined, which were to lead to the Nationalist victory in the 1948 election, had begun. The Trek centenary had taken place, and Afrikaner nationalism was a large enough force to play a part in the lives of many of the informants before they left for the North, as will be seen later.

The troops were absent from South Africa while these social, economic and political movements gathered momentum. At the end of the War, some of the veterans felt that they had returned to a country that was essentially the same as the one they had left a few years earlier, but in fact there had been considerable change during their absence. It was several years before veterans

¹⁷ B. Bunting - *The Rise of the South African Reich* (International Defence and Aid Fund, London, 1986)

began to address the political issues surrounding these changes in any effective way - thus the Torch Commando march on Cape Town only took place six years after the end of the War. The Torch Commando was important to the veterans in creating a retrospective understanding of their personal reasons for joining the armed forces. Having gone away to war for social reasons, or perhaps because of family links with Britain, the challenge to 'British' constitutionalism associated with Dominion status posed by the construction of an executive apartheid state threatened to upset a favoured political order. The removal of coloured voters from the common roll proved to be the principal flash point for the organised expression of political grievance.

Many of those interviewed were very young when War broke out - one soldier, for example, joined up in 1940 when he was only fifteen, having lied about his age¹⁸. Someone who left South Africa at the age of 16 in 1940 is now 70 years old: therefore the number of veterans who were in their mid-20s or older when they joined up is very limited, as so many have passed away. The experience of the interview group as adults within society was therefore fairly limited before they departed for War. Many went straight from school into the army, while all the others were in their first job.

¹⁸ Interview: J.E. p 3

It is this lack of experience prior to departure, and the age of the soldiers, which makes the War such an important event in the lives of all the informants. They all spent several formative years in the army and, having spent very little time as active participants in society before joining up, the army and the society it presented was to play an important part in forming the attitudes of these, its youngest members.

Everyone who was interviewed had their own reasons for joining the forces. The majority, however, remember only that it was the thing to do: 'I turned 16 and the War was on blah blah blah, and I wanted to join up'¹⁹. For others there was the influence of family tradition: 'I think it was just our background. My father had served in the First World War'²⁰. The most common factor remembered by informants as a motivation for going to war, however, was that most of their friends or colleagues had gone already or were going with them:

'We had about 10 or 12 ... we had a small office, and most of us literally joined up immediately. So the office closed down and we all packed up and left and went off with the army'²¹

Behind these seemingly social reasons for going off to war,

¹⁹ Interview: R.D. p 1

²⁰ Interview: J.W. p 8

²¹ Interview: H.B. p 10

however, was a degree of determination. For example, one interviewee went on hunger strike when his mother refused to sign the consent papers allowing him to join up - 'I didn't bloody eat. So eventually she signed the consent papers and I joined the Air Force'²². Noticeably absent from all the interviews was a sense of fighting for a cause, because the issues for which the War was fought were only important in a removed sense. In South Africa, joining the forces was more a symbol of belonging to a social group, of supporting and upholding a particular way of life, and of social acceptance amongst peers.

There were limits to the part that peer pressure played in joining the forces, however. While it could be a factor in the decisions of troops who went with friends, or who went later in the War when friends and colleagues had already joined, it cannot be claimed that those who went at the very beginning, on their own, and often under pressure from family to remain in South Africa, were under the influence of peer pressure.

The informants who lied about their ages in January 1940, or who went on hunger strike to be allowed to go were acting independently. It is here that the association of various strata of Cape Town society with Britain is seen to be very strong. While none of the troops identified any danger to South African

²² Interview: R.D. p 1

sovereignty because of the War, these soldiers, many of them very young, were sufficiently socialised into feeling some form of obligation to the Empire to motivate them to go and fight for Britain's preservation. According to Reynolds, this bond originated most commonly in the 'great waves of migration in the 1900s'. Loyalty to Britain as a country of recent origin was to prove throughout the Dominions a 'potent force in mobilising support for Britain in two world wars'²³. There is, however, no explicit expression in any interview of a specific political cause which made people join the armed forces.

Part of this absence of belief in a cause was reflected by an absence of explicit national patriotism expressed by the informants. Even the newspapers at the time did not often identify a physical threat to South Africa, expressing only Empire-based patriotism for Britain. Likewise, none of the informants said that they went to protect South Africa from a dangerous opponent. The feelings that seemed to lead most English-speakers to volunteer to join the South African forces at the beginning of the War were rather a sense of preserving their own group identity. Nevertheless, many of the informants did have an emerging retrospective notion of having fought for a country when they returned, and all expressed the feeling that

²³ D. Reynolds - *Britannia Overruled* (Longman, London, 1991) p 26

they had fought for a 'different country'²⁴ to the one that was represented in the 1948 election results:

'When the Nats came to power it seemed as though they were taking away the freedom we actually fought for'²⁵.

Joining the forces, then, was not only an affirmation of a place within a specific social group, but also a way of protecting the position of that group within society. When this previously dominant group was displaced from political power by the 1948 election, many of the veterans felt cheated, having fought and risked their lives for the preservation of, and identification with, an English and Anglo-Afrikaner political and social hierarchy that was in any event drastically altered shortly after they returned.

The state began the process of demobilisation in 1944. Harry Lawrence became Minister of Welfare and Demobilisation, and announced his plans for the process of accepting South Africa's returning servicemen and women in April. Apart from gratuities and clothing allowances, the government was to offer 'provisions for post-discharge employment for all classes of ex-soldier; financial assistance to re-establish the soldier in civilian life, such as by sending him to a university or technical college

²⁴ Interview: J.E. p 33

²⁵ Interview: P.M. p 42

... ; training for the disabled soldier; the provision of temporary housing ... and the cost of transporting families and effects.'²⁶ This amounted to one of the most comprehensive demobilisation programmes in the world. But, as will be seen from the sample of veterans interviewed for this study, there is certainly evidence to suggest that these benefits were by no means available to all veterans.

Cock, in her recent History Workshop paper on demobilisation on the Rand²⁷, points out that the government's demobilisation plans already discriminated along lines of race and gender, but she accepts claims that there was no discrimination according to rank or type of military activity among whites. However, while women, coloured and African soldiers did fare worse than white males, it will also be seen that officers were treated far better than 'other ranks' in the demobilisation process, and that for all veterans the government's plans were never fully implemented. Her paper also analyses the experience of African veterans, and compares it to what the government and other commentators claimed happened to all veterans. She tends to accept, however, one aspect of what appears to be little short of retrospective complacency: none of the veterans interviewed for this paper were treated uniformly in the way she assumes they were because they

²⁶ *House of Assembly Debates*, vol 49, 1944, columns 6048-6081

²⁷ J. Cock - 'Demobilisation and Democracy'

were white. While white troops had the potential to receive more from the demobilisation process than did their coloured or African counterparts, not all were recipients of all the benefits promised to them, for rank and class were to play a great part in the distribution of the government's demobilisation resources.

While her paper has enormous value for its attention to African veterans, it seems that she has neglected the discrepancies between what was supposed to have happened to white and coloured veterans and what actually did happen. Some of the veterans in this study, for example, thought that the £30 clothing allowance that they were given was their full gratuity, when they were also eligible for a lump sum equivalent to a shilling for each day they had served - a sum, in most cases, of over £60. They were unaware that this had to be applied for, and so never received the full amount owing to them.

The government's 'Soldier's Charter' proposed remunerating veterans according to the length of time they had spent in service. The plan set out in 1944 stated that white male soldiers would receive a lump sum of £1.10 for each month they spent in the forces (a shilling a day). White women were to receive 15s.0d. for each month of service, coloured soldiers 10s.0d. and 'Native volunteers' 5s.0d.²⁸. In addition to this payment,

²⁸ K. Gibbs - 'Demobilisation After World War Two' p 25

white soldiers were also to be given assistance in finding employment, and in retraining for civilian life. University fees and accommodation were offered to those who required them, while other veterans were given more practical assistance in the form of tools, jobs in the civil service and posts in the military²⁹.

According to the government, housing was also to be provided for those soldiers who needed it³⁰. As with the provision of jobs and equipment, however, the interviews cast some doubt as to whether or not this actually took place on a large scale, or if only a few fortunate individuals were given assistance in this regard, as will be seen in Chapter Four. While it is natural to agree with Cock and Grundlingh³¹ that the demobilisation machinery was intentionally discriminatory, this discrimination took place on many more actual levels than just race.

In assessing the experiences of demobilisation of the sample of veterans interviewed for this research, it is important to highlight aspects of experience which are not fully addressed in this thesis for reasons of space.

²⁹ H.J. Martin & N. Orpen - *South Africa at War* Vol VII p 356

³⁰ *House of Assembly Debates* vol 49, 1944, col. 6072

³¹ L. Grundlingh - 'Prejudices, promises and poverty: the experiences of discharged and demobilized black South African soldiers after the Second World War' in *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 26 (1992) p 134

It should be pointed out that demobilisation was experienced against a background of previous formative experiences. Gender, class and racial socialisation all played their part in creating attitudes and expectations of what the government should have done for veterans. The sample of interviews used here was chosen to find experiences common to the whole group by examining the experiences of soldiers from diverse racial and social backgrounds. The study also aims to point out contrasts in the experiences of different racial, social and economic groupings when these occurred. This sounds much easier than it is, however, and there were bound to be areas where differences in upbringing and social status before the War had an effect on behaviour after the War, which were not easily reflected by this sample.

In its post-War focus, this thesis looks at the way in which demobilisation was experienced by veterans for the first eight years after the War, and specifically at how their perceptions and identity in terms of gender, class and race had been formed and changed by the War itself and by the difficulties and changes they had to face upon their return to Cape Town. Finally, it assesses what I have termed the 'political identity' of the veterans - how the experience of fighting an empire War shaped their reactions to the advent of Nationalist rule and apartheid.

At the outset it must be stressed that all those who were

interviewed were urban English speakers from a city with an urban ethos. Many expressed a pride in this fact. For some, there was a belief that the language and its perceived connections both to Britain and to the political and social elite within Cape society set them apart from other South African social groups. Others saw English as a tool that gained them entry into this socially dominant group, and therefore a particularly important part of their identity. And, for most, it was carried further into a more concrete political allegiance at the time of the War. Several interviewees had actually been forbidden to speak Afrikaans at home - this was especially true of those from coloured backgrounds for whom English was a tool for social mobility. Others were not allowed to attend Afrikaans lessons at school:

'We missed all our Afrikaans lessons in our primary school ... because (our father) told our principal, he said, "Listen here, I'll take you by the scruff of your neck and I'll choke you till you're dead if you should teach my children that monkey language"'³².

In post-War South Africa, the War, language and political identity were to become inextricably linked.

³² Interview: R.F. p 16

CHAPTER 2

'We were always so happy'¹:

Cape Town during the War

¹ Interview: R.D. p 18

From what sort of city did the soldiers come at the outbreak of War in 1939? Cape Town was in a unique position in South Africa because it was identified as the contemporary centre of cultural activity in the Union - largely due to its position as the 'home' of a dominant English-speaking culture. Entry into the War was viewed as a very positive thing by most Capetonians, with only a few dissenting voices being heard, mostly from nationalist university students visiting the town from Stellenbosch protesting against South African participation in the Allied War effort. South Africa, claimed Smuts and his many supporters in the city, should be supporting Britain in her efforts to defeat Germany and uphold liberty and civilisation around the globe.

The allegiance of Cape Town and its people to the British Empire was clear throughout the War, and Capetonians were constantly being reminded through the press and functions such as the regular Sunday services about their 'debt' to Britain. In one of the Sunday Service Committee's booklets, for example, the correspondent claims conventionally that amongst the recruits going to war there was:

'No evidence of cowardly feeling, although they fully realise the dangers ahead. The words of Kipling, no doubt, are echoing in their mind:
"Not easy hopes or lies shall bring us to our goal,
But iron sacrifice of body, will and soul.
There is but one task for all - for each one life to give.

Who stands if Freedom falls? Who dies if England
lives?"²

The town was to undergo several changes in the war years - the increase in squatting and informal settlement³, the growth of industry due to the War, and political changes largely in reaction to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism around the country. It was also to provide a temporary stopover for many hundreds of thousands of troops as they passed around the Cape on their way to or from war on various fronts around the world. This study will also examine the treatment of these troops, and the ways those still in Cape Town identified with the War effort either through the work they did, their involvement in voluntary organisations, or through formal remembrance and organised memorial activities in the city.

The War years saw an enormous growth in the Union's industrial output. The net output of privately owned industries more than doubled in the years 1939-1945⁴. Employment in secondary industry also rose rapidly during the War. The increase recorded

² Secretary's letter in Sunday Service booklet for July 7 1940 meeting, p 8. *"Our boys": A city tribute* Vol. 1

³ This growth is documented in my honours thesis *"Into the wild bushes of Nyanga": the growth, control and relocation of urban squatting in Cape Town, 1939-1955*. (BA (hons) thesis, UCT, 1993, unpub.)

⁴ Department of Manpower papers, box 6 - the table given is headed *'Net Output of Privately-Owned Factories 1939-1940, 1945-1946'*. It is not sourced. It shows that the total net output of those industries rose from £86 704 905 to £174 807 751.

by the Office of Census and Statistics in secondary industry employment was 131 155 in the years 1935-1945. The increase in the previous ten year period was only 36 576⁵. The value of output per employee during this period also rose, by 39%⁶.

Although none of these figures have been broken down regionally, it can safely be assumed that commercial life in Cape Town experienced growth at least at the same rate as the rest of the country. Deroisin's account of Cape Town during the War tells of the numbers of soldiers who stopped over in the City and spent money while on shore leave. Such activity can only have benefited the economy⁷. In addition to this economic boost were all the defence works and building projects which were undertaken in Cape Town, all requiring considerable labour.

The Department of Defence undertook building works throughout the Peninsula: the radio station on Kabonkelberg, Hout Bay, and other constructions on Robben Island, Signal Hill, Simonstown Battery and in the mountains above Muizenberg. The City Council was also building - there was an extensive housing plan for Langa⁸, as

⁵ Office of Census and Statistics Special Report number 158 - *Employment in Secondary Industry, Mining and Transportation, 1925-1945*

⁶ L. Vivian - 'The labour situation and government legislation, 1937-1951' (BA (hons) thesis, UCT, 1959, unpub.) p 7

⁷ S. Deroisin - *La Taverne des Sept Mers: Carnets de Guerre, Cape Town 1941-1943, Algiers 1944*. (La Renaissance du Livre, Bruxelles, 1976)

⁸ The Langa extension plan, as will be seen later, never took off. See pp 38-40

well as the building of the Duncan Dock - a joint plan with the Department of Defence to deal with the expected increase in traffic during the War⁹.

Before the War, work had already begun on the reclamation of land which was later to become the Foreshore area. This work continued throughout the War, although at a decreased pace from that originally planned:

'They didn't fill it in from the shore, they brought this dredger out from Holland and they ... they plonked it in the middle of Table Bay. Off the shoreline. And there it sat for months and months just pumping water until eventually the water had sand in it ... and eventually this little pimple appeared. And that's how they reclaimed the land ... And then that grew and grew and then eventually they put in the breakwater.'¹⁰

As early as 1940, the *Cape Argus* had reports of improvements in employment throughout the Union as a result of the War¹¹. It provides several examples of how, with the fall in the availability of many of the materials needed for production, and the decrease in the number of imports, the Union had been

⁹ All from J. Whittingdale - 'The development and location of industries in greater Cape Town, 1653-1972' (UCT MA thesis, unpub., 1973) p 73

¹⁰ Interview: J.W. & S.W. pp 4-5

¹¹ See *Cape Argus* 12/8/1940

'compelled to rely on its own resources'¹², especially in the textiles, food and war industries, and all those providing machinery for this production¹³.

—
The increase in industrial activity in Cape Town was most pronounced at the Docks. Much of the work that took place there was of a skilled nature. The white skilled labourers who had performed these tasks were often away on service in the armed forces. 'Non-Europeans were employed on work formerly performed by Europeans. There was an influx of labour from the rural areas'¹⁴. The range of work undertaken at the Docks was very broad, especially after the closure of the Atlantic and Pacific routes. S D Mentz, divisional inspector of labour, listed the increase of work at the Docks in Department of Manpower Papers:

'We were called on to repair ships - big and little - badly damaged by ... enemy action ... Other major ship work was the converting of trawlers and whalers into armed vessels ... Now that the War is drawing to a close, we are reconverting these ships back for their peace-time use ... Four dry docks ... were built for service abroad as well as a considerable number of steel barges which were fabricated and sent overseas ... In addition to these major undertakings the construction of the Graving Dock, involving the employment of hundreds of artisans of all trades and

¹² Opening speech of the governor general to both Houses of Parliament, 12/1/1942. Department of Manpower Papers, box 4.

¹³ See *Cape Argus* 14/8/1940, 19/10/1940

¹⁴ From a paper by J F P Eve titled 'Industrial Disputes during the War and immediate post-War period' - Department of Manpower Papers, box 3.

thousands of semi-skilled workers, was started and completed.¹⁵

The growth in the manufacturing industry continued after the War and in 1948 manufacturing output contributed 22.2% of net national income - a 4.4% increase on the pre-War statistics¹⁶. By 1949, Cape Town was the second largest industrial centre in the Union, containing 13% of its industrial establishment and 16.5% of its industrial employees¹⁷.

In the light of this, it is not surprising that people came to the Peninsula in search of work - a fact which even the authorities recognised by the late 1940s. The War years marked a drastic change in the attitude of the authorities in Cape Town to the influx of black people into the city. While attempts were still made to control and regulate the flow of Africans into Cape Town, there was an entirely new approach to the reasons for the influx. It had been assumed before the War that farm life was rather monotonous for young Africans who had 'heard of the glitter, the movement, the excitement of town life'. The young

¹⁵ Department of Manpower Papers, box 3. Mentz's paper is titled 'Civil History of the War - Cape Town Inspectorate'.

¹⁶ In 1938-9 manufacturing was 17.8% of net national income, gold mining was 18.4% (L. Vivian - The labour situation p 3). By 1948, manufacturing output had risen to 22.2% of net national income, while all mining contributed only 11.8% (L. Vivian op. cit. p 47).

¹⁷ J. Cole - '"When your life is bitter, you do something ..."' in D. Kaplan (ed) - *South African Research Papers* (Dept. of Economic History, UCT, 1986) p 34

'Native' was drawn to the town by 'potent drink, amours, fine clothes, better opportunities of education, contact with civilisation'¹⁸. By the end of the War, however, it was accepted that industries encouraged the influx, that 'industrial development was the bait which attracted the natives'¹⁹. The War years thus saw the escalation of what was to become a permanent threat to the 'European' nature of Cape Town. African urban settlement was also, in the early years after the War, large scale and on a much more permanent basis than previously experienced. This does not imply, however, that white veterans, or other white Capetonians, necessarily felt threatened by the presence of Africans in terms of job security or other economic factors, but simply that the racial composition of the city was undergoing radical change.

As noted, one of the most striking features of Cape Town during the War was the almost continual presence of troops on shore leave as they passed round the Cape on the way to various fronts around the globe. It is very hard to estimate the number of troops who stayed in Cape Town during the War, but it is possible to obtain a rough idea of the volume of troop movements through the Cape from one or two revealing statistics.

¹⁸ *Native Economic Commission, 1932 p 56*

¹⁹ Dr W. Eiselen - 'The Coloured People and the Natives' *Journal of Racial Affairs* vol. 6, n° 2, 1955 p 7

There were various clubs for soldiers in Cape Town which aimed to provide a bed, washing facilities and meals as well as to perform a social function for troops on shore leave. None of these were able to cope properly with the number of troops who needed accommodation. At just one of these clubs - the Church Square Club - between the '16th June to 30th September 1941, no fewer than 34 000 meals were served and 11 407 beds occupied'. Tea and coffee sold at 1d a cup raised a profit of £407 in the same period - almost 1 000 cups of tea a day²⁰.

Another indication of the number of troops visiting Cape Town was that the 800 000 bus tickets made available by the City Council each year to soldiers were not enough for their needs²¹.

There were several clubs for troops in the Cape Town area, all of which aimed at providing a resting place for soldiers who were not taken into people's homes for the duration of their stay in Cape Town. By the end of 1941 there were clubs for troops in Spin Street, Church Square and the old Post Office building in the town centre. There were also clubs in Muizenberg, Simonstown, Mouille Point, two in Rondebosch, and a women's club in Sea

²⁰ City of Cape Town Council minutes - 30.10.41 (CA: 3A/1 1/1/96) p 176

²¹ City of Cape Town Council minutes - 25.2.43 (CA: 3/CT 1/1/97) p 507

Point²². There was also a rest house behind the City Hall in the Mayor's Garden, which was 'extensively patronised by troops'²³.

The clubs provided visiting troops with many of the basic requirements to ease their stay in Cape Town:

'The Church Square club has generally been a boon and a blessing to visiting soldiers, sailors and airmen by providing them with solid and substantial meals and with clean and attractive accommodation ... The facilities provided include 10 hot and cold water showers, which are constantly in use, whilst amenities have also been provided in the shape of a reading room, writing room, billiard room etc'²⁴.

Even as early as the end of 1941, however, the clubs were full to bursting point, and the services that they were providing were, of necessity, cut. The Church Square Club, for example, had already requested permission from the Council to extend its premises by December 1941. When convoys were in town it had become necessary 'to provide accommodation in the games room and all other available space within the club'²⁵. By mid-1942 the

²² These clubs are all mentioned in the *Cape Times* at various points throughout 1941

²³ Secretary's letter for 1.9.1940 meeting p 10 in "Our Boys" Vol. 1

²⁴ City of Cape Town Council minutes - 30.10.41 (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/96) p 176

²⁵ City of Cape Town Council minutes - 24.12.41 (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/96) p 403

club had been extended into part of the old Post Office building²⁶.

These clubs were all, however, solely for the use of white troops. For non-white troops no provision was made until the end of 1941 when the Cape Corps and Coloured Soldiers' Institute was opened in the Thomson Watson building at the bottom of Adderley Street, and even after this date the 'other ranks' from these regiments were ignored. Before this, there had been nowhere for any non-white troops to go in Cape Town, with even their officers forced to fend for themselves. According to the Mayor of Cape Town, the club would provide:

'a much required meeting place for the officers of non-European regiments passing through Cape Town, the lack of which had, in the past, proved a serious embarrassment'²⁷.

One aspect of having visiting troops in the city that is overlooked by many of the official sources is the disturbances that were sometimes caused by the soldiers in their more boisterous moments. While there are many light-hearted stories in contemporary newspapers about Just Nuisance, the Great Dane who was made an honorary member of the Royal Navy, helping out sailors who were feeling a bit worse for wear, most noticeably

²⁶ City of Cape Town Council minutes - 30.6.42 (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/96) p 928

²⁷ *Cape Times* 15.12.41

absent from newspapers and other public sources are accounts of the behaviour of Australian troops. These seem to have gained, as elsewhere, an almost legendary status for the trouble they caused. It is only in personal accounts that this is hinted at:

'En général les Corps Australiens sont redoutés: quand les tenanciers de bars aperçoivent dans les rues montant du port les célèbres feutres des *Aussies*, ils cachent précipitamment ce qui peut être caché, les meilleures marchandises ou les "dernières bouteilles" de soi-distant cognac français'²⁸.

*(In general the Australian Corps are feared. When the owners of bars catch sight of their famous felt hats in the streets coming up from the docks, they quickly hide whatever can be hidden: the best merchandise, or the 'last bottles' of so-called French cognac)*²⁹.

It seems that the Australian troops, more than any other group, relieved the frustrations of being confined to a ship for an extended period when they arrived in port. Peter Younghusband remembers meeting Australian troops as a young boy:

'Among the first to arrive were a convoy of ships bearing Australians. These were magnificent men who appeared to a young boy to be gods. However, they showed their mortality by rushing off the ships chanting, "We want women". Not fully understanding the meaning of this my brother and I took them home to our mother and I got my head smacked'³⁰.

²⁸ S. Deroisin - *La Taverne des Sept Mers* p 11

²⁹ Own translation

³⁰ Peter Younghusband in J. Crwys-Williams - *A Country at War* p 143

Their boisterousness, however, sometimes caused disturbances on the city's streets, as Deroisin was to witness:

'A force d'ennui, un régiment australien a organisé un *stampede* dans Adderley Street avec les chevaux des charettes maraîchères des Hindous, déshabillé des policemen et bouleversé ainsi les vieilles demoiselles'³¹.

*(Driven by boredom, an Australian regiment organised a stampede in Adderley Street using the carts of the Indian market gardeners as horses, undressing (?) policemen and even bundling over old maids.)*³²

The reasons for the urban rowdiness of the Australians are unclear, although it is suggested by Gill and Dallas, in their research into mutinies in World War I, that Australian troops had difficulties with authority in the army because of the more egalitarian nature of Australian organisation, compared to the stricter social hierarchy of the British Army, with its 'fixed gulf between officers and men'³³, upon which the South African forces were modelled.

The press silence about the behaviour of Australians is particularly interesting. The slightest disturbance in the daily

³¹ S. Deroisin - *La taverne des sept mers* p 11

³² Own translation

³³ D. Gill & G. Dallas - 'Mutiny at Etaples base in 1917' in *Past and Present*, n° 69, Nov 1975 p 99

five minute Noon Pause to show support for those who had gone away to War, a tradition continued from World War I, secured front page treatment in newspapers keen to sustain empire loyalty. The antics of gangs of Australians, running up and down Adderley Street pushing vegetable carts was, however, not mentioned. The authorities were obviously keen to keep such misbehaviour quiet in order to preserve the public order that had successfully been created in Cape Town with regard to the war effort.

An important aspect of society during the War was the way in which people were encouraged to support the war effort. This support was to take many forms, from the wearing of 'V for victory' badges and giving money to various War Funds, to taking soldiers into homes for weekends and observing the noon pause. This was especially important early in the War in the face of German advances across Western Europe, and after the fall of Tobruk in June 1942, where several thousand South African troops were taken prisoner. A fall in public support for the War at either of these times could have had a very negative effect on the drive for recruits and the raising of funds that would have to go on almost constantly throughout the War.

One of the most successful displays of public support was the world-wide 'V for Victory' campaign launched in mid-1941. Here,

Cape Town entered the campaign with enthusiasm, where V badges were sold in aid of Red Cross funds. Ten thousand such symbols in the form of badges and car stickers were sold in July 1941 alone:

'It was difficult to move anywhere without coming across the welcome V sign. Motorists sounded their hooters in the morse signal for V - dot dot dot dash'³⁴.

The SABC used the opening bars of Beethoven's 5th to start and finish all its news broadcasts for the duration of the War from this time onwards - the rhythm being the same as the morse code for 'V'³⁵. Until the end of the War the *Cape Argus* and the *Cape Times* both used a line of 'Vs' to signify breaks in their copy.

Other campaigns were also undertaken in which people were placed in the position of being able to participate directly in the War effort. These campaigns did not just have a practical side in terms of what was needed to win the War, they also served to make people feel that they were, in their own way, an important part of the forces, fighting on the home front.

One such issue was the 'Don't talk about ships' campaign, where Capetonians were asked not to discuss any details of ships that

³⁴ *Cape Times* 23.7.41

³⁵ *Cape Times* 23.7.41

were in the docks with anyone - this was of only limited success until sailors stopped wearing the name of their ships on their hatbands in mid-1941! The assumption was that if information about the arrival and departure of ships was not common knowledge, then it would not be so easy for agents to find out about troop movements and relay that information to U-boats that were in the region.

'Don't talk about ships and shipping' boards were posted around the city in 1942³⁶. Deroisin comments on the success of this campaign in her notebooks:

*'Sur tous les murs, de grandes affiches: Don't talk about ships or shipping! Cape Town portage un énorme secret connu de tous et dont nul ne parle'*³⁷.

*(On all the walls, great posters: Don't talk about ships or shipping! Cape Town carries a great secret known to all, but of which no-one speaks.)*³⁸

Another way for Capetonians to become involved in the War effort was to take part in the various fund-raising events that were organised in the city. These ranged from small-scale concerts and fetes run by local organisations, to the huge national war funds and events such as the Liberty Cavalcade, which raised large sums

³⁶ City of Cape Town Council minutes - 29.9.42 (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/97) p 61

³⁷ S. Deroisin - *La Taverne des sept mers* p 10

³⁸ Own translation

of money.

As just one example of the smaller events, one of the most successful was an annual fair held in Pinelands in aid of war funds - the first fair in December 1940 raised £5 000³⁹. The larger funds were to raise considerable sums of money for the War. The Governor-General's War Fund, which was the largest, raised £4m by April 1943⁴⁰. Cape Town's contribution to these funds was considerable - General Smuts' Birthday Fund for 1943, for example, raised a total of £350 000, of which over £53 000 was contributed by Capetonians⁴¹.

Perhaps the largest fund-raising event in the city was the Liberty Cavalcade which took place in March 1944. This was a grand fair which took place mainly in Green Point, although events did spill over into other areas. The entertainment on offer over the 7 day period of the Cavalcade was quite remarkably varied: mock battles, miniature villages, flower shows, Robben Island trips, air shows, mock trials, tank displays, street shows and markets, auctions and wrestling were all planned. The Cavalcade even opened with a mock landing on the beaches of Three

³⁹ Secretary's letter for 5.1.41 meeting p 8 in "Our Boys" Vol. 1

⁴⁰ *Cape Times* 9.4.43

⁴¹ *Cape Times* 26.8.43

Anchor Bay by the Union Defence Force⁴². The seven day pageant raised £220 000 for the Governor-General's War Fund⁴³.

The full list of war funds is extensive and would take a long time to complete - not least as there was a proliferation of such organisations in 1945, as people tried to raise money to alleviate the suffering that the War had caused in Europe's newly liberated cities⁴⁴.

Other forms of participation for Cape Town were less practical than the fund-raising drives which took place throughout the War. Two of the most famous were the regular monthly services held in the City Hall which gave the citizens of Cape Town an opportunity to remember those who were away fighting, and the daily Noon Pause, where all activity was supposed to stop as the city showed its continuing support for the War.

The Sunday Service Committee organised a religious ceremony on the first Sunday of every month for the duration of the War. Their services had taken place on a much more informal basis

⁴² See *Cape Argus* December 1943 - March 1944 (There is almost an article a day about the Cavalcade in all the local press)

⁴³ *Cape Times* 21.7.44

⁴⁴ In 1945 there were at least 6 separate funds established to supply aid for European cities: the Salute London Fund (*Cape Times* 31.7.45), the Netherlands War Relief Fund (*Cape Argus* 4.10.45), the King Haaken Fund for Norwegian Relief (*Cape Times* 5.4.45), the Yugoslav Relief Fund (*Cape Times* 12.5.45), the Liberated France Relief Fund (*Cape Argus* 10.4.45) and the Bombed Cities' Relief Fund (*Cape Times* 1.11.45)

during the First World War. During the Second World War the services were paid for by the City Council, and provided a platform for many notable speakers from religious and secular circles. Each month a booklet was produced giving the order of service for that month's meeting and also a run down of events in Cape Town over the preceding month.

The booklets also provided information about the speeches at the previous month's service. It was intended that these booklets would then be sent to troops, who would know that they were remembered in Cape Town⁴⁵. The booklet also served to bolster the morale of those who had relatives and friends fighting in the War, as Jan Hofmeyr recognised when he addressed the meeting in 1940:

'In the course of his address he said that the thoughts and prayers of all present went out to their friends and relatives on active service. To these men and women such meetings must be a source of great strength. The meetings also enabled those who attended them to reaffirm their allegiance to the great cause which was being fought - the cause of human progress, dignity and freedom'⁴⁶.

The secretary of the committee, who wrote the pamphlets, also acknowledged what he considered to be the role that the meetings

⁴⁵ Secretary's letter the 7.7.40 meeting p 3 in "Our Boys" vol. 1

⁴⁶ Secretary's letter for 6.10.40 meeting p 5 in "Our Boys" vol. 1

would play in building morale in Cape Town:

'If this, on the other hand should be read by one of the friends, it is hoped that he or she will be comforted and consoled in the dull moments that come to all when the loved one is away. What a wonderful healer is a little human sympathy, is it not?'⁴⁷.

The other main form of regular remembrance practised in Cape Town was the daily Noon Pause - another ritual that was carried over from the First World War. While the pause was occasionally disturbed, it was generally observed by the vast majority of those in the city. On the whole, in fact, the pause was a very successful and well-observed daily ritual. One visitor to the Cape reportedly claimed of the pause that:

'It was the most solemn and inspiring function I have ever attended. The effect was magical and ennobling - a city spontaneously at prayer'⁴⁸.

It was the city's women who seem to have been the most active participants in Cape Town's war. The SAWAS organisation was a focal point for fund-raising activities, as well as for making items for troops, providing hospitality for visiting soldiers and organising entertainment for those soldiers who were in Cape

⁴⁷ Secretary's letter for 7.7.40 meeting p 3 "Our Boys" vol. 1

⁴⁸ Quoted in Secretary's letter for 4.8.40 meeting p 5 in "Our Boys" vol. 1

Town. All this work was carried out by volunteers, while Cape Town also had a permanent force of women soldiers which numbered about 2 000⁴⁹. The Toc H club for these service women was one of those in the city centre which had to turn people away because it was frequently full at weekends.

The work of the SAWAS, however, is probably the best-known contribution to the War made by women. They operated on several different levels. Firstly, they organised groups of women to make clothing and parcels for the troops at the front:

'I have seen the City Hall crammed full of women at trestle tables cutting out cloth into the various required dimensions, whilst others are busy making garments or knitting pullovers, scarves, jumpers, socks and such like'⁵⁰.

Among the most useful and beneficial contributions made by SAWAS to the war effort was probably the hospitality scheme initiated by the organisation:

'I'd get phoned up at 7.30 a.m. and be told, in code, the number of troops who would be coming ashore at the docks at 11 a.m. ... I would then have to get the municipal halls ready ... Five hundred women with cars promised to use their petrol rations only for the SAWAS troop services, and I would commandeer any buses I saw on my way to the docks. We handled up to 60 000

⁴⁹ City of Cape Town City Council minutes, 29.4.43 (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/97)
p 717

⁵⁰ Secretary's letter for 7.7.40 meeting p 6 in "Our Boys" vol. 1

men at a time for one week every three weeks'⁵¹.

Once ashore the troops were taken to various homes around the Peninsula for the duration of their stay in Cape Town. So successful was the scheme that it spread beyond the confines of SAWAS control. If soldiers were in town, then they were often approached on the street by people inviting them into their homes:

'At 4.30 I take a stroll round town and collect the three smallest, most weary and plainest soldiers I can see ... The small plain ones are on the whole most amusing as they don't depend on their looks for entertainment'⁵².

SAWAS also organised entertainment for the troops while they were in town. There were regular dances for soldiers at the City Hall, while officers were entertained at Kelvin Grove:

'My friend Mabel and I would go to the ones in the building behind the City Hall. What fun we had with those boys ... English and Australian I think. I was about twenty-three at the time. They were really decent, not snotty or pushy. No, we were never invited to Kelvin Grove, we weren't the right type, but that didn't bother us, we had enough fun'⁵³.

⁵¹ Interview: L.B. in D.S. Lewis - 'Different Sides of the Same Coin: the position of coloured and white women in Cape Town during World War II' (BA (Hons) thesis, UCT, 1989, unpub.) p 25

⁵² *Cape Times* 10.5.41

⁵³ Interview: G.B. in D.S. Lewis - 'Different sides of the same coin' p 41

As is suggested in this extract, the dances at Kelvin Grove were whites-only affairs at which the middle-class officers and their partners were entertained:

'Segregation was a fact of South African life and if an officer appeared at a ball with a coloured woman we would be obliged to ask him, politely, to leave and rather go to a hotel. We couldn't allow any mixing'⁵⁴.

This is not to say that such 'mixing' did not take place:

'There was a lot of war babies. In those days there wasn't an Immorality Act - a girl could walk about with a white man and it was all right. There were many girls who had white chaps, many'⁵⁵.

Women were also called on to work in factories while men were away at war. Munitions factories in particular required women workers because coloured and African men were not deemed suitable for such security-sensitive work. Statistics of the numbers of women employed in factories during the War are very hard to come by, but there are reports about the type of work that women were doing. In one munitions factory - the location could not be given in the article - it was reported that the women workers were much faster than the men and were having to wait for the men to catch up with them on the production line. It was concluded that 'their

⁵⁴ Interview: L.B. in D.S. Lewis - 'Different sides of the same coin'
p 41

⁵⁵ Interview: B.J. in D.S. Lewis - 'Different sides of the same coin'
p 45

sense of touch is mainly responsible for their speed'⁵⁶.

It seems that all the Cape Town press agreed that women taking an active role in the industrial labour force was only a temporary measure, filling in a gap in a time of need. Certainly, after the War, the number of women working nationally returned to its pre-war level, with only 20% of white women over 15 working in 1946, and nearly 84% of working women employed as secretaries, nurses, saleswomen or teachers⁵⁷. While they were employed on war work, however, women were portrayed in popular imagery as sacrificing their social role, and perhaps even their genteel dignity, for the sake of the War:

'With broken heart and blenchéd cheek,
Yet ready smile to cheer the weak;
The lifelong day at lathe and bench,
No work is this for comely wench.

A youngish girl of gentle birth
Knew nothing of this sordid earth.
Her sweetheart bravely fought and died,
Her kinsmen scattered far and wide.

Many gone ne'er to return
Little time to think and mourn;
She 'lifts her eyes' for health and strength,
To carry on until at length
The bells ring out 'The war is won,'

⁵⁶ *Cape Times* 4.9.41

⁵⁷ *Population census, 7 May 1946, vol. 5: 'Occupations and Industries'*. UG 41/1954 pp 34-40

Her country free, her task well done.'⁵⁸

Another area in which Cape Town expected to play an important part in the War was in the housing of British evacuee children for the duration of the War. The initial proposals to remove children from Britain to the Dominions were on a very large scale indeed. Canada and South Africa were to be the main recipients of 'guest children', and the plan was that they would spend the War living with South African families, attending school and participating in the household as a family member.

By June 1940, it was expected that the first parties of children, 'totalling between 2 000 and 2 500 would probably leave England early next month and be in South Africa before the end of July'⁵⁹. The scheme was put on hold when a ship carrying children to Canada was torpedoed and sunk in the Irish sea on its way to Canada⁶⁰. The first batch of 300 children only arrived in September⁶¹. Despite the expectation that 2 000 children a month would arrive in Cape Town for dispersal around the country, these were the only children ever to come to South Africa as part of the evacuation scheme. The subsequent torpedoing of another

⁵⁸ This is from a book of similar literary gems that was sold for war funds in Cape Town. 'Veritas' - *Topical Cape Town. For war funds* (No publication details)

⁵⁹ *Cape Times* 7.6.40

⁶⁰ *Cape Argus* 13.7.40

⁶¹ *Cape Times* 20.9.40

ship bound for Canada made the British government decide that the transportation of the children was not worth the risk.

The failure of the scheme was made all the more disappointing because of the huge response there had been to the call for people to house the children when they arrived. Reception committees were flooded with applications. It seems that the care of the children was a considerable rallying point, and their welfare created a great deal of public interest:

'Cape Town is responding splendidly to humanity's call ... and arrangements are being made in good time for the reception of evacuee children ... Arrangements have been made regarding the provisional housing of the children - the Governor-General's residence at Westbrooke being offered and accepted as one of the preliminary hostels'⁶².

On the whole, the picture formed of Cape Town's involvement in the War is conventionally a very positive one. It would seem that most of the white population of the city was keen to become involved in the war effort in one way or another. Undoubtedly there were some areas where this support was lacking, ranging from the apathy of 'ordinary' nationalist Afrikaners to the radicalism found in the Philippi farming area, where there was a considerable pro-Nazi German community.

⁶² Secretary's letter for 7.7.40 meeting p 6 in "Our Boys" vol. 1

This dissent was, however, fairly muted, and caused considerable outrage among the rest of the white community in Cape Town, if the number of letters sent to the papers on such issues is any indication of public feeling. While official statistics for the region which could substantiate support for the War, such as recruitment and support of war funds are very hard to come by (most figures being given on a national level), it is safe to say that there was in Cape Town an increased sense of a loyalist community during this period which, arguably, marked the high point of white English-speaking culture in South Africa, both politically and socially.

CHAPTER 3

'I suppose it was a formative
period in my life'¹:
Wartime experience, 1939-1945

¹ Interview: S.M. p 24

'There was no such thing like drilling, or keeping yourself in ... your uniform in spotless condition. You were always clean, mind you, your clothes were always clean because it was the easiest thing to wash your own clothes in a barrel of octane, and then just rinse it out in water. No, everybody was your pal. And there I was, captain of the soccer team in the desert. And I had officers playing on the team, and it was just one big happy family, except the adjutant, he was a bit of a bastard, he was the old ... a real old disciplinarian from the Union. Fellow by the name of Daniel... You know he was always going and getting his discip (sic) staff to see that the blokes were doing this and the haircuts and things like that. And our OC, strangely enough, you may have heard of him, a fellow by the name of Galvert, Oscar Galvert, who was head of the Supreme Court in Rhodesia before they packed up, and the OC that followed him strangely enough was another bigshot - old Cecil Moorgate - he was the other. Old Galvert he was a great hockey man, he used to often watch the soccer. And he said to me one day "Come and see me" I thought "What did I do wrong now?" He said, "How can you play soccer in those horny boots?" he said - I was playing in ordinary takkies. He said, "You'll injure yourself", so I said, "It's better than playing in the boots". He said, "Why," he said, "cut them down". I said, "It's wilful destruction of government property." He said, "It's an order, cut them down." Eventually he sent down to Cairo for a pair of proper soccer boots and he said to me, "Why

don't you play hockey - it's very much the positions the same as soccer. I'm sure you could do well with it." So he said, "You come to the hockey field, there's going to be a hockey match." And I went down and a bloke took a corner, man, and this ball came across, and being a soccer player I tried to head it. I threw the hockey stick down and I went ... No, but it's amazing the camaraderie that's built up amongst 600 blokes like that. There were about 600 blokes in the squad, and everybody knew everybody else, there were never any fights, you know, when you think of men living together like that all the time, no arguments. We used to get a shot of issue brandy on the Monday night, everyone's entitled. But apart from that when we had a plane going down, when we were off operations, they'd send a plane down to the Delta and they'd load it up with beers, whisky, the officers and all got whisky and NCOs and the mechanics and the corporals etc. We drank beer. So often you know - there was a fellow, Buchanan - as a matter of fact I played soccer with him down in Cape Town in the junior leagues before we joined up. He came up as a gunner to our squadron. He used to bring his bottle of whisky and swap it for my bottle of beer. But the daily routine there was getting up for your breakfast and then hanging around until you heard the operations gone. When our intelligence officer got an order from the powers that be that such and such a target was going to be attacked. Then of course, only then would we as armourers know what type of bomb to put up now. And

all the time the first thing you did was to go down to your planes and we used to cover our guns up, you know. What a desert sandstorm is like, if you've never lived through one don't ever try it. It's called a Khamsin² - khamsin is the arabic word for 5, and it blows for 5 days, and everything but everything is covered in dust. Even as you sit in your tent dust used to sift through it like a fine blizzard, so we used to cover our guns up, and every morning go look out and see if there was no sandstorm, see that it's completely clean, the ammunition racks were full and things like that, and just wait for the bomb lorry. Then when the bomb load comes, we were operating out of North Africa, we were operating against Crete. Now that was normally a four to six hour operation, so we'd bomb our kites up, see our kites off and then go and play soccer or do what you want to until the bloke says, "Here they come!" and you see our 5 or 6 little specks appearing on the horizon and then we're ready to see that the bombs are off etc. But look the thing is with the bombing squad there's more time off than what you're working. As long as you keep a continuous eye on your equipment, that it's not been dusted up. And then the hard work comes - loading the bombs and things like that - going to fetch them at the bomb bunker and bringing them to the plane and then dropping them off. You know it was nothing for us as youngsters taking a 500 bomb, one bloke

² Khamsin actually means fifty (*Collins English dictionary*, (HarperCollins, Glasgow, 1992) p 851

on that side and one bloke at this side, and taking it up, and one bloke bending, putting it on the back. And he stands up and straightens up and you just connect the bomb hook to the bomb-bay. And that's the way we used to do it, otherwise, you got to stand winding it with the winch, two of you, and if you don't wind regular - I'm winding too fast for that bloke - the bomb is doing this, the bomb is doing that, so we never used to bother. We just used to pick it up and put it on his back'³.

³ Interview: J.E. pp 19-22

Much of the experience of life in the armed forces recalled by the veterans in interviews is about the frantic moments of activity to which all soldiers were subject. Many, like the informant cited above, also remember the more ordinary experiences of waiting, playing sport, drinking and trying to fill the time before the next period of activity began. Memories about the boredom of being in the War, and a level of cynicism about the nature of the routine which the armed forces imposed on their troops are very strong for all the veterans who were interviewed. In these moments, we begin to see how the troops interacted and formed a distinct society which shaped responses to their return to South Africa.

The War experiences of the veterans were shaped by two forces which were unique to South African Allied troops in the conflict. Firstly, the South African forces did not achieve any major military victory. The action in which a large number of troops was captured at Tobruk in June 1942 was to be the last time that such a sizable, separate force of South Africans would be involved in a major military action, except as part of a mixed group of countries. After Tobruk, South Africans were only significantly involved in the pushes through Italy from January 1944 until the end of the War. In these actions, however, South Africans worked in conjunction with American and British troops,

not playing a leading role themselves⁴. The Italian campaign, moreover, did not have the same decisive battles that had taken place in the desert, 'in Italy there would be no Delville Wood, no Sidi Rezegh or Tobruk, no El Alamein ... the Italian campaign was not a spectacular war'⁵. The most important experiences of South Africans in the War, then, were the defeats at Sidi Rezegh in November 1941 and Tobruk⁶.

Secondly, and partly as a result of this secondary role, a large proportion of South Africans serving in the Allied forces were in non-combative roles. The introductory interview extract is representative of a large section of the interview sample - almost half of those interviewed were drivers, mechanics, nurses or supply troops. This shaped the experiences of the troops greatly. As will be seen, the life of a combat soldier was obviously very different to that of a driver or a mechanic. There was not the same level of routine for combat troops nor was there the security that being posted away from the front lines offered.

⁴ An account of the various campaigns through Italy is given in N. Orpen - *South African Forces World War II* vol V. A less 'official' account, which concentrates slightly more on the experiences of individual troops is to be found in J. Kros - *War in Italy*. Of all the Ashanti books on the War, however, this is among the most concerned with the military details on which Orpen concentrates.

⁵ J. Kros - *War in Italy* p xiv

⁶ For personal accounts of these two defeats, read the interview extracts quoted in J. Crwys-Williams - *A Country at War* pp 159-174 and 229-245

This chapter will examine the life experiences of the Cape Town informants during the War, looking at the routine of army life, and at the extraordinary experiences of those who were removed from that routine into other circumstances as prisoners of war or those who were obliged to cope with quite desperate situations in combat. The different forms of entertainment that the troops provided for themselves will also be examined, as will reactions to the proximity of deadly danger.

Of the twenty-four soldiers interviewed for this study only three did not actually leave the borders of South Africa. All of these were women, two of them nurses and one a coastal defence gunner at the Simonstown battery⁷. Only three others played no part in the various campaigns which took place in the Western Desert, two being members of the Royal Navy, and one a Royal Air Force pilot who was involved in the bombing of occupied Europe at the time of the Desert War⁸.

For the other 18 veterans, war inevitably meant some time spent in the desert. For five of this number, this time was cut short when they were captured at Tobruk with the majority of the South African 2nd Division⁹. It is not unusual that a sample of Cape

⁷ Interviews: H.S., J.W., E.H.

⁸ Interviews: B.Ru., R.F.

⁹ Interviews: H.B., B.R., R.M., S.M., S.W.

Town veterans should contain so high a percentage of ex-prisoners from Tobruk. The 2nd Division was popularly known as the Sportsman's because of the high number of Cape Town sporting figures who had joined it. It is commonly recognised by veterans to have been a 'Cape Town unit'¹⁰.

The remaining veterans were all involved in the Desert War in various ways. Pilots flew from North Africa to bomb German troops in the desert and across the Mediterranean to targets in Southern Europe¹¹, while infantrymen fought at Gazala, and at El Alamein¹². Many of the troops subsequently crossed the Mediterranean to join the drive through Italy, which was where the War ended for most South Africans. Some Air Force pilots were sent to Asia after VE day, but few saw much action there, as VJ day followed sufficiently quickly for their transfers to be just completed by the time the War ended¹³.

The periods which individuals spent in the forces appeared to vary relatively little. It seems that people tended to join up in blocs. There were those who rushed to the recruiting office on the day war was declared by South Africa. They were to join

¹⁰ Interview: S.M. p 3

¹¹ Interviews: P.M., D.A.

¹² Interviews: J.E., E.I.

¹³ Interview: S.Ma. page 34

the 1st Division and spend in excess of five years in service. Only two of the eleven infantry soldiers interviewed were in the 1st Division¹⁴. Then there was the Sportsman's Division, formed in mid-late 1940. This Division was only active for one year, leaving South Africa in May 1941 and being captured at Tobruk in June 1942. Five of the eleven infantry soldiers interviewed were in this 2nd Division¹⁵. The final large group of volunteers from Cape Town were to join the 6th Division - the 'Tobruk Avengers'. This division was only very briefly in the desert, and spent most of its time in the successful Italian campaigns¹⁶. While only three of the veterans interviewed were in the 6th Division¹⁷, the response to the fall of Tobruk can be seen in the level of recruitment around that time for other services. Of the non-infantry veterans interviewed, several were to join up very soon after the fall of Tobruk. Two of the women, one Royal Navy and four of the Air Force veterans were to sign up in mid-1942¹⁸. As the nickname of the 6th Division suggests, the defeat of the South African forces at Tobruk spurred many ordinary people into action¹⁹.

¹⁴ Interviews: B.G., E.I.

¹⁵ Interviews: H.B., B.R., R.M., S.M., S.W.

¹⁶ N. Orpen - *South African Forces World War II* Vol V, p 2

¹⁷ Interviews: W.H., J.H., F.P.

¹⁸ Interviews: J.W., H.S., D.A., P.M., S.Ma., R.F.

¹⁹ N. Orpen - *South African Forces World War II* vol IV

From these three divisions, soldiers spent between three and five years in the forces. None of those interviewed spent less than three years as a soldier, and only one - a British RAF officer who had been in the Air Force before the War - spent any longer than five²⁰. The average length of service for the interviewees was about four years, which, given that the 1st Division only left South Africa in July 1940 and the 6th Division left in 1942, is representative of the South African forces as a whole.

During their years away, the soldiers were naturally subjected to a routine entirely different from that of civilian life in Cape Town. It can be argued that in the armed forces, troops felt secure, being provided with a 'system of social security which did not exist in civilian life²¹'. Much of life in the army, however, was strange to the volunteers, and circumstances were often trying. Meals, friendships, working hours and entertainment were all conducted, of necessity, very differently in the army.

From the start, entering the army meant facing an entirely new routine from that of civilian life. This change was immediate - indeed the routine enforced in training was often stricter than that faced in later service. All troops, even auxiliary nurses, spent a period of training learning drill and basic army, navy

²⁰ Interview: C. & E.H.

²¹ K. Gibbs - 'Demobilisation after World War II' p 12

and air force tasks: 'filing and bugging around and drill bullshit'²², before moving on to train for the specific tasks they would perform in the armed services. It seems that all found the period of training very intensive:

'Every day we did several hours. I suppose there was a fair amount of theory as well. And then later in the course ... we had to do night-flying as well, which was very hair-raising to do ... you had to concentrate like mad, and then we'd ... come back exhausted at about 12 o'clock and have some fried egg sandwiches or something like that and flop into bed. Then we were due at lectures the next morning. Most of the guys were just like blotto, trying to keep awake.'²³

Training was also intensive in that there was very little time off given to recruits. Basic training lasted for six weeks, and then the draft was split up into groups for different forms of specialised training²⁴. This meant an extended period without any leave at all. While there was opportunity for recreation in towns near the training camps - especially for those near Johannesburg or Cape Town - leave passes were very rare. For most, this meant six months of almost total separation from families and friends. Upon completion of the training course, a soldier was given a fairly lengthy period of leave - two weeks was the most common period - to visit family before being

²² Interview: R.D. p 2

²³ Interview: P.M. pp 4-5

²⁴ I. Gleeson - *The Unknown Force* p 112

despatched to duty²⁵.

Once training was done, the daily life of soldiers was ruled by the tasks which they were performing. The non-combat troops were able to maintain the greatest level of routine in their lives as soldiers²⁶, although, as can be seen from the interview extract quoted at the start of this chapter, even these men were subject to great fluctuations in the level of activity required of them.

The most variable lifestyles in terms of levels of activity were to be found in the Air Force. Both the air and ground crews were dependent upon the frequency of missions to keep them occupied. A tour of duty for an air crew member was seventy-five missions - which often took over a year to complete. This means that on average a pilot and his crew would only be flying a mission one day in every five²⁷. Obviously, there were times when flying was very frequent, just as there were long periods of inactivity; in Italy, during the winter, for example, poor weather prevented bomber squads from leaving their aerodromes for long periods²⁸. Ground crews were also subject to such changes in their working day. When a mission was being flown they would have a brief spell

²⁵ Interview: J.E. p 12

²⁶ J.A. Brown - *The War of a Hundred Days* p 98

²⁷ Interview: P.M. p 18

²⁸ Interview: E.I. p 14

of intense activity when planes were being prepared, and then often a long wait for them to return to base²⁹. The Air Force's armourers and engineers were also subjected to longer hours than were pilots, for they had to unload the planes and prepare them for flight again after the pilots and crew had returned, whatever time of day or night it happened to be:

'The hours were a bit longer, because if you had planes flying late in the afternoon or in the evening, you had to be there to see that the guns were taken down and cleaned and covered and serviced and things like that.'³⁰

The Navy also placed those serving in it in a very unusual routine. Sailors worked on their coastal defence ships for very long spells, often up to a month without any shore leave at all:

'You stay out at sea. Only when you have to do vittles ... (do you come in) ... Sometimes you'd stay out at sea for a month ... and when you came in for cleaning or oil, they'd give you shore leave, when you were round here. But even on the short patrol, you know outside the harbour here in Cape Town you don't run in every night, no, you stay out there for more than a week. You see towns, you see the lights and so on. So near and yet so far.'³¹

Infantry soldiers were subject to short periods of activity when

²⁹ Interview: J.E. p 21

³⁰ Interview: J.E. p 15

³¹ Interview: R.F. pp 7-8

they came into contact with enemy troops. The frequency of this contact often depended on the particular arena in which soldiers were serving. The men who served in the 2nd Division, for example, commented on the difference between the campaigns in Abyssinia and those of the Western Desert:

'And then we were right up to Mersa Matruh. We started a different war here. Up to now it had been like a Cook's tour of travel, you know we were just on the move all the time, little rests, bad conditions, you were battling the terrain and the weather, but hardly the enemy. Now you suddenly came into a different atmosphere. You could feel it.'³²

The Desert War often involved long periods of waiting for the troops, or else moves from one place to another followed by a period of digging in and preparing for the next battle. Within this, the regularity of air raids and of small skirmishes allowed a sort of rough troop routine to be established:

'You went in (to the gun pit) at five at night and you came out at daylight the next day, also you were there over the moonlight nights. You'd hear, in the distance, sort of guns and things going off somewhere, and then whistles - they had whistles blowing for air raid warnings - and these whistles would start blowing and then of course everybody ducks like mad for the gun pits. On a given order everybody started. When the 3.7s started firing everyone just opened up. We just loaded like mad. We just kept on firing. Huge.'³³

³² Interview: H.B. p 27

³³ Interview: H.B. p 27

In less busy periods, while soldiers were at the front, they found ways to entertain themselves. Sports teams were organised, drinks were available in messes, books were read³⁴ and shared and for the fortunate few - normally those in the Air Force - weekends off were relished.

Sport played a large part in the lives of many troops. It was a source of great rivalry between different units, and a focus of camaraderie within divisions and battalions³⁵. A variety of sports was played, with soccer, cricket and hockey the most popular, although some more unusual activities were also organised. One officer, for example, put together two teams to play a game of polo on donkeys. Even General Poole joined in³⁶. The same officer was also involved in frequent games of softball during his time in the Western Desert.

Football was the most popular sport amongst troops, and the most fervently supported. One interviewee found that his abilities on the soccer field made him very popular with his comrades:

'In all the time those two stations were there,

³⁴ The interviewees who mentioned book reading said that they normally read cowboy stories. See for example interview: R.D. p 12

³⁵ J. Crwys-Williams - *A Country at War* p 287

³⁶ Interview: R.M. p 2. Major General Evered Poole commanded the 6th South African Armoured Division. After the War he became Deputy Chief of General Staff until the 1948 election when he was posted to Germany and the position of Deputy Chief was abolished as the National Party tried to gain control of the armed forces. D. Harrison - *The White Tribe of Africa: South Africa in Perspective* (Macmillan South Africa, Johannesburg, 1985) p 154

Kaspariq had never been beaten. We got to this camp at Ismailia. And they had this station team there, and I said I'd got enough South African soccer players here to raise a team to beat them. So we beat them 2-1. And this pal of mine and I were selected to play for the station team against Kaspariq. And we beat Kaspariq 1-0. I scored the goal. Do you know how drunk those blokes made me? I don't know how I ever got back to the bloody camp.'³⁷

For the less sporting, reading was an important leisure activity, although it does not seem to have been as common among South African troops as among British, who had a purpose-made 'Penguin Pocket' on their uniforms to carry their paperbacks³⁸. For the South Africans, books were hard to come by and had to be shared. Often this sharing process was done by actually tearing the pages out of the book. Once the first person to read the book had finished a page he would rip it out and pass it on to a friend, enabling several people to read at the same time. Lots were drawn each night to see whose turn it was to go first³⁹.

Such leisure was obviously a far cry from the chaos of battle. The frenzy of activity which surrounded combat missions, either on the ground or in the air, made many of the soldiers forget

³⁷ Interview: J.E. p 28-9

³⁸ P. Fussel - *Wartime: understanding and behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989) p 243

³⁹ Interview: R.D. p 12

what it was they were actually doing. There was a separation in their minds between the bombs, shells and bullets which they sent out, and the destruction which they caused when they reached their targets. This separation was caused in part by the very technical nature of what soldiers had to do. For the pilots and bomb crews and for anti-aircraft troops, dropping a bomb or firing a shell involved a complicated series of calculations. The distance between the soldiers and the target also helped to create this isolation from the result of their actions:

'It sounds horrifying to actually think of doing all this, but when you're young ... it doesn't really dawn on you that you're flying and killing people ... We used to do what was called close support. That is we got maps and charts showing where our troops were, the line or whatever it was, and then we had to bomb just ahead of them. Bomb the enemy just ahead of our chaps. And that was very tricky because you had to be very very careful that you knew exactly where you were dropping your bombs.'⁴⁰

This detachment is also described by South African infantry soldiers⁴¹, in sharp contrast to the familiarity with horror and the bitterness it created which Fussell describes among American troops. This highlights the differences between the South African and extensive European American ground combat experiences, and provides an explanation for the low rate of

⁴⁰ Interview: P.M. p 9

⁴¹ See for example interview: R.H. p 27

shell-shock among South African troops⁴².

For those who were to be taken prisoner during the War, the frenzied activity surrounding combat was to provide a stark contrast to the boredom of camp life, as will be seen later. This was to make life as a prisoner of war even harder to accept within post-War memory.

Making people accept orders and changes in their living patterns of the magnitude required by army life implied a high level of discipline. That all South African troops were volunteers affected discipline, in that indiscipline was not a great problem in the forces. Often an interviewee would recall that, despite a sense of disagreement, 'that was the order, so I did it'⁴³. Inevitably, the volunteer soldier did not have the same grievances against the system which a conscript might have had. This acceptance of the chain of command was impressed upon soldiers when they were training, where transgressions were punished either physically, or with the removal of privileges or even of freedom for a short period⁴⁴.

One of the interviewees was in a group accused of having stolen

⁴² C.f. American experience in P. Fussell - *Wartime* p 271

⁴³ Interview: B.G. p 19

⁴⁴ I. Gleeson - *The Unknown Force* p 112

a clock from an aircraft on which they were working. As their superiors could not decide which of the group was guilty, all were punished:

'They didn't know which of the five had pinched this clock. None of us did, but anyway we were accused of it. And we were given square bashing. Standing with full packs, loaded with bricks, and a bloody rifle right up above our heads, double (marching) all the time'⁴⁵.

Predictably, such crime against property was not as severely punished as violation of the chain of authority. In wartime, obedience to rules was more important to efficiency in the forces than the sanctity of property relations. Thus, while theft brought only a couple of hours of daily hard physical labour for three days, the punishment for being back late from pass leave was much more severe; for 'any deviation from it meant a 14 day pass stop, and if it was repeated more than once then seven days in detention barracks was not out of the question.'⁴⁶

The removal of a pass was a very severe punishment for troops. Leave was an important part of life in the forces, allowing soldiers to relax and to escape briefly the rigidity of army life. During training in particular, soldiers were given little actual leave, although they were frequently allowed out to nearby

⁴⁵ Interview: R.D. p 18

⁴⁶ Interview: J.E. pp 15-16

towns for entertainment. The veterans who were stationed in South Africa for the duration of the War either as nurses, guards or trainers would maintain this system of passes and leave throughout their period of service. This gave an element of recreational predictability to their lives which was missing from those who were on active service outside the Union. The women who worked on guns protecting the Simonstown docks were given one day off in every three, although they could not leave Simonstown on all of these days. They also had one full weekend off a month⁴⁷:

'You had to catch the train into Cape Town. Because you were in uniform you paid half price on the trains and you also paid half price at the cinemas. Train fare from Simonstown to Cape Town was 2/6, we paid 1/3. The cinema was also 2/6, so we paid 1/3.... You couldn't get from Simonstown on your off duty during the week to get to a cinema, you had to stay in ... you could only go off on what was called your proper pass day, then you went up the line.'⁴⁸

For the soldiers posted to theatres abroad, however, leave was normally given in much longer stages than the occasional day off which locally based troops received. Moreover, the regularity of leave differed, depending on where troops were at a given time. In the deserts of North Africa, most of those interviewed were given leave for two weeks every three months, except when heavy

⁴⁷ Interview: J.W. p 10

⁴⁸ Interview: J.W. pp 12-13

fighting was exacting service demands. One interviewee had a novel idea about the reason for there being such liberal leave rights:

'When we were in the desert every three months you were forced - you weren't forced, you were gently told - you went on leave to Cairo. The idea was to prevent homosexuality. They used to send us to the delta for about 14 days'⁴⁹.

But the war in the desert mostly forced troops not only completely away from the company of women, but also away from any towns which might offer a social break. There was no access to places for drinking, dancing and other forms of entertainment. In the Italian campaign, however, where troops were in much closer contact with nurses and Italian village populations, leave was given much less frequently:

'They took us out of the fire after a year so that we could get two weeks' rest'⁵⁰.

The increased female presence in Italy did not necessarily mean that there was no demand for prostitutes. While many of those interviewed were unwilling to give prostitution more than a passing mention as something that other men availed themselves of while on leave, one or two gave an insight into the wry humiliations of the impoverished economy of prostitution:

⁴⁹ Interview: J.E. p 23

⁵⁰ Interview: B.R. p 16

'Oh yes, of course there was prostitution. We were in Italy - you could screw for a bloody bar of chocolate. My pal van Tonder and I were on leave and we were in Florence and we were trying to find the Springbok club. And we meet this old girl and she said she was going to take us now to two lovely young girls. So we said, "How much?". "No, a couple of bars of chocolate." I tell you we walked through alleyways and up and down steps and we get to this bloody room and we think, "Hell, now the game is on." So she said, "Right, it's me." This old girl. So we just gave her the chocolates and said bye-bye.'⁵¹

As well as revealing the extreme deprivation and desperation of war-ravaged Italy, this anecdote also points to just how many of the troops could obtain paid sex while they were on leave. A woman could approach troops with an offer of sex, knowing that she would secure a customer at some point with chocolate as the basis of exchange. Despite the discretion of the interviewees, many of whom were interviewed with their wives nearby, the implication is that it was normal for soldiers to visit a prostitute while they were on leave.

The other, and much more widespread activity while on leave or on a pass, was drinking. Despite the supply of alcohol to some of the messes in the various South African divisions, the troops still sought out alcohol while away from their units. While what

⁵¹ Interview: R.D. pp 19-20

was on offer to drink changed as they went from one place to another, soldiers spent their savings on whatever they could lay their hands on:

'When we got to Italy, of course, it was different there, there were wine shops ... - they had no beer, only wine - and that cost next to nothing. And I remember in Germany I bought ... 24 beers for 23 pfennig. There were 100 pfennig in the Deutschmark and the Deutschmark was worth something like ... 2 shillings, so you can imagine. The only thing is that the beer was brewed from onions and not from hops, so for a month or two afterwards if you belched, you were still tasting the onions in your mouth.'⁵²

Much of the time spent on leave was also spent away from brothels and bars, visiting the sights of the towns through which the armies were passing. Hence, troops were also aware that they were seeing places that they would seldom have the chance to visit again:

'I had a week's leave in Cairo ... our whole battery was given leave in turn and we had a week down in Cairo. That was a real burn up. I mean the chaps tore off down there and we gave it a really good go ... I mean I don't think I slept. I don't remember sleeping. We did everything ... the zoos, the mosques, the bazaars, the pyramids, the night life ... I don't know how we filled it all in, but it was a week of solid celebration.'⁵³

⁵² Interview: J.E. pp 23-4

⁵³ Interview: H.B. p 34

One or two of the veterans carried a conscious awareness of being travellers as well as soldiers into the field with them. They were drawn into closely observing the life of the communities through which they passed and carried these memories with them after the War. The fact that they were at war at the time made this different from the normal travel experience, but it has left its mark on several of the veterans:

'We used to have to wake up early in the morning and do these exercises ... One of them I remember which was very fascinating, was low flying over the Nile Delta, with all the rivers, the irrigation canals. We would fly very low down and we would see all the activities on the ground. The oxen threshing out the corn in the old style, going around and around, you know pulling a stone around... And mud huts and flat-roofed houses and all this sort of thing.'⁵⁴

One of the interviewees was so aware of the opportunity to travel while in Italy that he used the leverage he had over his commanding officer to get an extended trip around the continent:

'And one day he came to me and he said, "I've got some stuff that I want you to take with." So I sold a few things for him there. So I said to him, "I'll tell you what, you give us a route form," - we had to travel with an authorised permit looking for spare aircraft parts ... off planes that had crashed and things. He said, "What aircraft?" So I said, "Planes crashed all over the place." So we managed to get up to Paris. We went all over and then we went to Paris, and from

⁵⁴ Interview: P.M. p 7

there we went through Luxembourg, and from Luxembourg we crossed into Germany at Frankfurt. And then we came down through Munich, through Austria, through the Brenner Pass and back into Northern Italy.'⁵⁵

For others, however, any awareness of travelling while being at war was rendered impossible by the circumstances in which they found themselves. This was most clearly demonstrated in an interview with a couple who were showing slides of their trip round Germany, Holland and Belgium to their friends - most of whom were veterans. They had found all the places they visited very interesting, and had several slides from Germany. These were of particular relevance to two of their audience:

'We showed all these villages, and there was one of a little village square ... it had a cobbled floor, and all of a sudden Chippy said, "But that's the square where a can of milk fell off the milk lorry". And Sidney said, "Yes, and we all got down on the ground and licked."⁵⁶

These two men had been prisoners of war and had been on one of the notorious Death Marches, as prisoners were pulled back from advancing Allied forces so they would not be liberated. The scene of what was for them an horrific and degrading memory was, for their friends, a pretty village square. It is also ironic that until this point, some fifteen years after the end of the War,

⁵⁵ Interview: J.E. pp 26-27

⁵⁶ Interview: C. & E.H. p 43

neither of these men, who had been good friends for a long time, had known that they were both on the same march.

The tedium of life in the prison camps was a sharp contrast to the frantic activity of combat to which the majority of South African prisoners - especially those taken at Tobruk - had become accustomed. For those in the camps, the routine was very strict indeed, with very little to do to fill the boring hours between meals and roll calls. Meals were dull - 'macaroni and tomato purée'⁵⁷ - and living conditions extremely rudimentary. Most prisoners were sent out of camps for long periods to work. In Italy, this normally involved agricultural work, but after the invasion of Italy began, many troops were moved back into the North, and some were even taken into Germany⁵⁸.

Those who stayed in Italy were all placed back in camps, from which they either escaped or were liberated as the Allies advanced⁵⁹. Some of the prisoners, however, were removed by German troops before their camps were overrun, and these soldiers were once more engaged in work in Germany. This was usually less agricultural work than had been the case in Italy - working on railway lines, for example, was a very common prisoner's

⁵⁷ Interview: H.B. p 44

⁵⁸ J. Crwys-Williams - *A Country at War* p 393

⁵⁹ See for example: Interviews S.M., H.B., S.W.

occupation⁶⁰. The understandable unwillingness of many of the veterans to speak openly about their experiences as prisoners means that much of the life of prisoners of war remains hidden. The hints that are given, however, point to a very melancholy and aimless existence. In the camps, for instance, the soldiers' mood depended upon how far away the next consignment of Red Cross parcels was:

'By this time the Red Cross parcels were getting through to us. And now the cheerfulness. The week they delivered Red Cross parcels everybody was happy, and the following week they didn't deliver them, so you were morbid as hell again... It was like a ... barometer - fine weather, bad weather... When you got your parcels it was great.'⁶¹

Life in the armed forces, then, was based partly around learning to cope with fluctuating periods of boredom and frantic activity. Through all this, the discipline and routine of the wartime experience of many of the veterans was to be what would ultimately make it so difficult for many to return to civilian life. While some initiative was necessary in the forces, most of the time was spent obeying orders and maintaining discipline - a sharp contrast to the relative freedom outside the army. In the armed forces, actions were taken because orders were given commanding that they be done, in civilian society it was up to

⁶⁰ Interview: H.B. p 51

⁶¹ Interview: H.B. p 45

individuals to decide in principle which actions were best for them, and to find their own motivation for doing things. It was this transformation that many were to find difficult:

'It was totally strange... One can't even say it was the regimentation because you were regimented in the army ... But it wasn't quite the same because there was no responsibility ... It's funny, it took me a long time. It affected everybody differently, I think.'⁶²

⁶² Interview: H.B. p 37

PART 2: THE POST-WAR PERIOD

CHAPTER 4

'Thank you very much, you nearly
died for your country,
now goodbye'¹:

Confusion, success and disappointment:
the demobilisation process

¹ Interview: G.d.J p 1

'He got £30 and two blankets and a ditty box. You got a greatcoat, a pair of boots, and two blankets. Two blankets, and £30. And a full issue of kit, if you wanted it. I didn't take a full issue of kit and uniform because it wasn't necessary, I was going into civvy street. But there were lots of men who did not have jobs. You know, because I had a job to go back to, it's not uniform, it was clothes. Like in England you got a suit for the ex-soldiers, it was the same in South Africa, you could get that. That's why they gave you £30, to clothe you. Thirty pounds went a long way ... I'll never forget the extra pair of boots I got. They were still the old brown boots that were regarded in Europe, of all the armies, as the finest boots of all. And we got an extra pair, and I gave it to old Oupa Wolhuter, I'll never forget that because I didn't have use for a pair of boots. I took whatever else was going, but you got that ... the clothing allowance, you're quite right, was £30. There was another amount as a gratuity. You got a cash amount as a gratuity. The men may have got it. You know, I can't remember ... I served for three and a half years. I remember the £30 I got, but I can't remember any other money. It would be interesting to find out if the women got it, you know, because we weren't paid on the scale as men. Even in those days we moaned, we were always talking about it, and talking to our officers about it, because we reckoned we were replacing men, especially the unit I served in, because I was with the Coast Artillery, and it was the only women's unit that

we could put 'on active service' on our letters, because it was supposed to be a fighting unit. Thank God we never saw an angry ship come into Simonstown but we didn't get the same pay as men, we got women's pay. Whereas men got more, you know, I think they got double our pay. Or at least a half again.'²

'Well, you got it in your hand, plus the boots, plus the two blankets. I'm telling you we thought we were rich. Especially men who had jobs. You see bank clerks had no bloody money, I mean until the War broke out, we'd never had any money. And then can you imagine, one year in the desert, a year in training camps, I think for five years, three out of that I couldn't spend a cent, you know, I was a prisoner of war. And it all accumulated. And then suddenly you found yourself bloody rich. Rich was £1 000 those days. You know what a motor car cost? You know, all of us bought cars when we could get hold of them. I mean a Chev motor car, a brand new deluxe Chev, not the standard model, a deluxe Chev, £455. First of all 385 and then 455. We bought our Chev just after we got married in '47, '48 maybe, I bought that for £475. At first at £425 I wouldn't buy one, I thought they were far too bloody expensive.'³

² Interview: J.W. pp 3-5

³ Interview: S.W. p 14

Upon their return to Cape Town many ex-soldiers found that their world had changed, or that they had changed, and found the adjustment to civilian life very difficult. Many missed the camaraderie that existed in the forces, and were left feeling 'adrift ... There was a lack of security, of close relations, of associations'⁴. Many of the veterans also found the change of attitudes in the society in which they had lived hard to adapt to. In the army they had felt that they were part of a unit working for each other. Back in Cape Town, however:

'Everybody was intent more or less on their own thing ... a lot of guys had problems, I mean psychological problems and that kind of thing when it came to starting a new life back in civvy street.'⁵

Such a drastic change in surroundings needed a change in outlook from the veterans. As one interviewee pointed out, in the War you lived one day at a time - 'you didn't plan for the weekend or anything because you didn't know whether you'd have it'. Some of the veterans returned to society married and with a child, a position which necessitated forward thinking and the assumption of new responsibilities⁶.

⁴ Interview: P.M. p 37

⁵ Interview: P.M. p 22

⁶ Interview: C. & E.H. p 9

The most common area for the manifestation of difficulties surrounding the return to Cape Town was in the workplace. The story of unrest in work, and of drastic changes in career or of a succession of jobs being gone through in an attempt to find somewhere to settle down, was repeated over and over. 'I went to several firms'; 'the idea of being a clerk behind a desk, no'; 'I never really enjoyed my work like I did the RAF, the RAF was part of my life, part of my psyche. Those jobs weren't.'⁷

Although the majority of informants claimed not to have been affected by the War personally, all except three experienced changes at work, either choosing an entirely new career or changing firms three or four times in the five years immediately after the War⁸. This instability could be attributed to the fact that jobs were readily available to ex-servicemen after the War and so it was possible to shop around until you found something that suited you - it was only with the end of the post-War boom in the early 1950s that many of the veterans finally settled down to one job for an extended period.

Those within the sample who had the hardest time readjusting to civilian life were the POWs. Not only did they have to cope with the removal of the routine of army life, but also with the

⁷ Interviews (in order given): B.R. p 21; R.D. p 14; C. & E.H. p 34

⁸ See interview: R.D. pp 12-13

reintroduction of freedoms they had not known for some time - many for a number of years:

'When somebody said get up, you got up and put your boots on and went out. Here you had to now get up and go somewhere and sit down and start to try to do a day's work, you know. By 10 o'clock I was bored stiff. I just wanted to get out and go for a walk'⁹.

For some informants who had been POWs, the answer to this malaise lay in religion. It provided the basis for a ready-made community willing to accept them, and consequently many, particularly those from the Air Force, turned to the church. It is particularly interesting that many pilots from the Air Force became involved in religious communities upon their return, especially in light of the debate amongst some members of British Bomber Command about the morality of saturation bombing - two of the six pilots interviewed joined the ministry on a full-time basis after their return to Cape Town¹⁰. The church offered friends, comfort and a ready-made social order for all those who joined after the War. The appeal of such factors must have been considerable for some who felt troubled by the conduct of the War, and uneasy with society upon their return. For those informants who did not seek out such communities to ease their rehabilitation, re-entering society was a gradual process - for some it seems the

⁹ Interview: H.B. p 58

¹⁰ For example see interviews: P.M. p 29; D.A. p 24

readjustment was particularly hard, and fulfilling male social contact could best be found only in the MOTH hall and the S.A. Legion residences¹¹.

The Smuts government was certainly aware that the returning soldiers were going to present a problem to the administration. It was believed that the neglect of veterans of World War I had been one of the reasons for the downfall of the South African Party government in 1924¹². So an elaborate scheme was put in place which was intended to provide for many of the needs of the returning soldier¹³. Financially, veterans were to be given gratuities, which for many supplemented army pay remitted back to the Union as well as salaries from civilian jobs which had been paid in their absence.

This left certain veterans in a very comfortable position - perversely, the POWs were the best off in financial terms as they had drawn none of their pay during their internment:

'One year in the desert, a year in training camps ... I think for five years, three out of them I couldn't spend a cent, you know, I was a prisoner of war, and it all accumulated, and then suddenly you found

¹¹ See interviews: O.P. p 31; S.M. p 14

¹² J. Cock - 'Demobilisation and Democracy' p 6

¹³ This scheme is described in some detail in F. Oosthuizen - 'Demobilisation' pp 53-88

yourself bloody rich'¹⁴.

There is uncertainty, however, over the size of the gratuity received. Only two of the informants remembered the gratuity to be the shilling a day that the government had promised¹⁵. An examination of some of the veterans' discharge papers showed no mention of any gratuity, whereas others disclose that a gratuity was granted. Many were not aware that there was a gratuity they could apply for, whereas some even received more than their proper allowance. One ex-officer, for example was given £200 - which would have meant a service period of almost 11 years¹⁶.

Others, however, were not so lucky. None of the women interviewed remembers receiving any money¹⁷. And even among white men, there was some confusion about the size of the gratuity. One of the informants was given a gratuity of £25 after 4 years of service¹⁸. One of the veterans who did get a gratuity for the correct amount according to the government's outlines was made to pay over 80% of it in tax for a reason which he bitterly still does not understand:

'Out of £120 they're going to give me, 100 off, so I

¹⁴ Interview: S.W. p 23

¹⁵ Interview: J.E. p 30

¹⁶ Interview: B.R. p 29

¹⁷ Interview: J.W. p 16

¹⁸ Interview: D.A. p 17

had £20. What the hell can I do with that?'¹⁹.

Provision assumed that coloured and black soldiers would receive less money. The normal basis to determine the size of all grants, gratuities and loans available to coloured soldiers was that they be 60% of the maximum grant available to white troops. Hence coloured troops should have received a gratuity of £0.18s for each month of active service²⁰. Yet not one of the Cape Corps veterans interviewed received any gratuity at all above their £18 clothing allowance²¹. None of them was made officially aware that a gratuity was due to them, and that they had to apply for it.

Coloured veterans did, however, have access to the Governor-General's War Fund, although the maximum amount of support they were given was 60% of that available to whites. It seems that this was meant to be granted on an ad hoc basis as a 'top up' in times of need rather than their being given a large one-off cash sum²². One coloured veteran did gain access to the fund to

¹⁹ Interview: B.G. p 33. I have not been able to find out what could have been the cause of this taxation.

²⁰ *Report and recommendations of the committee appointed by the Director-General of Demobilisation to investigate post-war employment opportunities and benefits for coloured ex-volunteers* (hereafter Coloured Ex-volunteers committee), § 10 p 4. See also § 6 p 2

²¹ The Cape Corps veterans' clothing allowance was to be 60% of that of Europeans. Their access to the Governor-General's Fund was on the same basis. *Coloured Ex-volunteers Committee*, §6 page 2 and §10 p 4

²² Interview: R.F. p 12

undertake teacher training, although his access to the fund was naturally restricted²³. The Fund was more helpful to white soldiers who were in need of retraining or who decided to take a course at a university. Many needed new skills to do their new jobs and so were sent on courses with money from the Fund²⁴. Others went to university and had their university fees paid and were given free accommodation out of the Fund:

'It was £200 or some bloody thing, and I ended up living at Belsen, I think they call it Driekoppen now, it's on De Waal Drive. It's an ex-serviceman's place there, we were the foundation members'²⁵

Soldiers who did not require retraining, but who needed other forms of assistance were also to be helped, according to the government's plan²⁶. The most commonly mentioned form of practical assistance was the provision of tools to artisans. Once again there seems to have been some considerable confusion surrounding this clause, especially for those returning late in the demobilisation period, when the demobilisation centres had no tools to give to soldiers: 'I had to get £50 of tools which they'd promised us. Of course they was all flogged in Jo'burg

²³ Interview: R.F. p 12 and *Coloured Ex-volunteer's Committee*, §10 p 4

²⁴ Interview: J.E. p 30

²⁵ Interview: R.D. p 6. Driekoppen (which was still called Belsen by many of its inhabitants until recently) is a residence of the University of Cape Town, situated just below the main upper campus complex.

²⁶ *House of Assembly Debates*, vol. 49, cols. 6048-6081

before we even looked at them'²⁷, and so vouchers were given instead. Stores and shops, however, had little more stock than the government: 'I went to every firm that I could think of, and they all laughed at me - nothing.'²⁸

It seems that rank played a large discretionary part in deciding how the compensations of the system were to be divided. It is important to note that the majority of those on the committees of the DSDC offices seem to have been officers. One of the informants was placed in the queue at the DSDC offices between a mechanic who wanted his tools, and an officer who wanted his entire family and household removed to the UK, at a cost of about £2 000. The officer had his removal paid for, but the mechanic did not get his tools. The interviewee himself was given £750 to start his painting business - the chairman of the board was his old school principal²⁹.

Those on the negative side of this split felt much bitterness. Informants who demobilised as privates or as non-commissioned officers were often left with a sense of resentment and disillusionment:

'A lot of them had lost their jobs, you see ... all they got was £30 and a suit, now you have to go and

²⁷ Interview: B.G. p 32

²⁸ Interview: B.G. p 33

²⁹ Interview: G.d.J. p 34

find your own way. Thank you very much, you nearly died for your country, now goodbye. That's for fighting for your country, or not even fighting for your country, fighting for Poland. Nobody's ever even seen Poland'³⁰.

For some of the veterans this bitterness has never left them:

'They treated us really shabby, and they wonder why you're bitter, even to this day I'm still bitter. Because you gave up something and then they come along every six or seven months they come along, "Oh you chaps mustn't worry, when you come back ...". We came back to nothing, absolutely nothing.'³¹

It was the coloured and African soldiers who were to fare the worst, however. Coloured soldiers received only an £18 clothing allowance and very little else. None of the informants received any gratuity, only one was given limited access to the Governor-General's War Fund to ease financial difficulties, from which he drew a total of £8 over the next three years³². Access to the fund was granted to another coloured informant in order to finance vocational training as a teacher. This patchy experience seems to have been fairly typical. According to Gleeson, coloured and African veterans were aware of the availability of loans and grants, if not of gratuities, although applicants had to prove

³⁰ Interview: G.d.J p 1

³¹ Interview: B.G. p 36

³² Interview: R.F. p 12

that they had 'suffered financial loss at home as a result of their absence on military duty'³³.

The issue of housing is also one in which the government's plan and the reality for veterans diverged. Cock points out that there was a building programme aimed at housing returning soldiers, and also that military camps were also converted for this purpose³⁴. Such conversions were done at Pollsmoor³⁵, but housing was not available to all ex-soldiers. Often the only benefit given to veterans was that they were placed on a separate housing list that gave them priority over any houses and flats that became available for rent³⁶. Coloured soldiers, however, were placed on the main lists for housing and simply had to wait their turn³⁷. Although there were housing schemes proposed for coloured veterans, most of these suffered the same fate as those for white soldiers. The commission appointed to investigate post-War employment possibilities for coloured veterans made no comment on the suitability of any of the housing schemes which were submitted to it. Its only comment was that:

³³ I. Gleeson - *The Unknown Force* p 265

³⁴ J. Cock - 'Demobilisation and Democracy' p 4

³⁵ Interview: J.W. p 32

³⁶ Interview: B.G. p 35

³⁷ Interview: J.H. p 9

'Every precaution be taken to prevent as far as possible the supply of strong drink being made available at or near any of the settlements referred to'³⁸.

The most important reason for the lack of houses provided for returning soldiers was that the City Council was strapped for cash at the end of the War. During the War the Council's expenditure had risen by 40% from just over £3,5m to just under £5m. During the same period its income had risen only slightly more than £700 000³⁹. While housing schemes were planned for veterans, they were generally inadequate, and were nearly all scrapped. Originally, land for building was available to the Council, and plans were submitted for 78 flats in Maitland, 100 flats in Durban Rd, Mowbray, and a further 12 houses in Sea Point⁴⁰.

The plans in Mowbray were dropped and the land sold off to a private developer. The reason officially given was that the Council had felt that flats would spoil the nature of the 'better class area' in which the land was situated⁴¹. The sources intimate, however, that this decision was financially motivated -

³⁸ *Coloured Ex-volunteer's Committee*, § 23 p 9

³⁹ *City of Cape Town: Minute of his Worship the Mayor 1945*, p 1

⁴⁰ *Mayoral Minute 1945*, p 1

⁴¹ Cape Town City Council minutes, 28.12.1946. (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/110) p 821

the private developer was eventually to build Liesbeeck Gardens on the same site, a block of flats three stories higher than that planned for the veterans.

The cancelling of the plans to build houses for veterans in Sea Point was admitted to be because of the financial pressures the Council was facing. The land, along Ocean View Drive, had been set aside in July 1945, but it was decided to put the land up for public auction early in 1946 when the Council decided that its original budget 'couldn't be met'⁴².

Despite the financial pressures the Council was facing after the War, and despite the fact that the Government did not offer assistance or advice as to how its plans for housing veterans should be carried out⁴³, there were some houses built for veterans returning to Cape Town. A total of 56 flats and cottages were built along Gabriel Road in Plumstead which were put aside for the exclusive use of ex-volunteers⁴⁴. These streets still retain the names they were given to reflect the connections of their service inhabitants - Churchill Street, Alamein Drive, Dan Pienaar Rd - although the housing was largely taken over by working class whites after their brief occupation by veterans.

⁴² Cape Town City Council minutes, 28.2.1946. (CA: 3/CT 1/1/1/100) p 820

⁴³ Mayoral Minute 1945, p 13

⁴⁴ Report of the City Engineer of the City of Cape Town, 1946, p 19

For those veterans who wished to farm there was supposed to be a fairly generous provision, subject, presumably, to a viability test⁴⁵. Veterans were meant to be supplied with a trolley wagon, a plough, a harrow, one row planter and free seed for a probationary period. Furthermore, they were to be given a farmhouse consisting of three bedrooms, a kitchen, a lounge and a bathroom⁴⁶. They were also to receive financial assistance for the first 18 months of their time on the farm. These conditions were also to apply to coloured farmers⁴⁷. As all the land offered to veterans who wished to farm was in the Transvaal, however, few from Cape Town took up the government's offer⁴⁸.

Despite its apparent shortcomings, the government and its supporters saw the demobilisation programme as a great success. Compared to the demobilisation at the end of the First World War, the 1945 programme was a significant improvement and the government felt able to claim that 'history has not repeated itself'⁴⁹. This rather short-sighted opinion has been confirmed by the few historians who have since examined the 1945

⁴⁵ This is a presumption because the farming land made available to veterans was in the Northern Transvaal, and information regarding its allocation is not readily available in Cape Town.

⁴⁶ *Coloured Ex-volunteer's Committee*, schedule H

⁴⁷ *Coloured Ex-volunteer's Committee* § 19 p 7

⁴⁸ *Coloured Ex-volunteer's Committee* § 19 p 7

⁴⁹ Directorate of Demobilisation - *Demobilisation in South Africa* (Directorate of Demobilisation, Pretoria, 1945) p 1155

demobilisation programme for combatants, with only one or two exceptions⁵⁰.

The apparent differences, however, in the treatment of ex-soldiers along lines of rank, race, class and gender were to reinforce a process which the War and demobilisation had begun. Ex-soldiers began to redefine their identities, both individually and relative to their peers, along these same divisions.

Some veterans had aspirations to change their social status after the War, while others were to take great pride in their position. For example, one of the informants, a motor mechanic, proudly displayed his hands in a shop while buying an expensive suit, proclaiming, 'Dirty hands, clean money'⁵¹. On the other hand, an ex-Anti-Aircraft officer, who had described himself as being from the upper middle classes before the War, and whose father had been a leading industrialist, now showed a desire to be a 'gentleman farmer'. This he saw as being a rise in social status, and referred to a rather romanticised idea of life on the farm:

'I pictured myself as a farmer, being the gentleman's gentleman, because it was said that the gentleman's gentleman had the best of both worlds. He wasn't tied down by anything ... He smoked all the best cigars,

⁵⁰ Gibbs' 1990 thesis, for example, recognises the inequalities in the demobilisation regulations in as far as it applied across racial boundaries. It does not, however examine the importance of class and rank in determining how veterans were treated.

⁵¹ Interview: B.G. p 7

drank lots of the best wine, he was able to drive the fastest Rolls Bentley, and probably met all the nicest girlfriends, so I thought I'd quite like to be like that.'⁵²

One of the veterans became very wealthy as an artist after the War, and was able to live this ideal lifestyle to a certain extent. His lower status experience as a private in the army, however, made him very aware that his social acceptance depended a lot on his wealth. In the army, where his low rank had made him part of the army's 'underclass', he had had a stinging experience. This gave him a unique look at being in both the highest and lowest groups of society:

'I felt just as if I was a coloured man in South Africa, that I wasn't allowed to sit there and I wasn't allowed to go there.'⁵³.

Now, he believes that, 'I've got lots of friends because I'm wealthy. If I was poor then I wouldn't have any. If I come with my Rolls Royce, then they tell me, "Oh hello, sir, you can go here". But if I came with a Volksie then I could drop dead.'⁵⁴

For the majority of the veterans, however, there was very little change in their class status and identity before and after the

⁵² Interview: B.R. p 23

⁵³ Interview: G.d.J. p 13

⁵⁴ Interview: G.d.J. p 13

War. The mechanic in 1939 was still a mechanic in 1945, and the same was true for Council workers, artisans and clerks. While many might well have had aspirations of social improvement after the War, most returned to the situations in which they had been before joining up.

The most notable exceptions to this were some individuals among the coloured veterans, whose participation in the War placed them in an advantageous position when it came to finding employment, and for whom new opportunities presented themselves to some extent after the War. This supports Marwick's theory⁵⁵, who has argued that historically disadvantaged groups in society have generally been rewarded for their patriotism and labour during wartime through post-War benefits. This has not normally been viewed to be the case in South Africa. But it can be seen here that certain coloured groupings may have gained social mobility through their participation in the War.

Thus, one informant had been a deck hand for Irvine and Johnson when he left for War in 1942. Upon his return, he trained with assistance from the Governor-General's War Veteran's Fund and went into teaching, eventually becoming a school principal in 1951⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ A. Marwick - *Britain in the Century of Total War* (Bodley Head, London, 1968)

⁵⁶ Interview: R.F.

It is here that some coloured soldiers who served in World War Two were possibly at a relative advantage over some of their white counterparts, although most coloured soldiers could never rise to the positions in society occupied by a white veteran by virtue of racial policies. Their war service set them apart, identifying the veterans with the particular groups within the upper echelons of coloured society that had supported the War effort⁵⁷.

Serving in the forces thus gave future employers, especially the administration, a favourable impression of coloured veterans and thus promised greater opportunities of advancement within the coloured community. Although many coloured and African soldiers were unemployed after the War, having participated created chances of social mobility to some that had been closed before the conflict.

⁵⁷ Interview: H. Villa-Vicencio interviewing Mr D. Neethling p 30

CHAPTER 5

'The post-War piss up is over,
money is hard and you've got to
get yourself a bloody job'¹:
Employment and economy in post-War
Cape Town

¹ Interview: R.D. p 5

'Well we missed all the convoys that used to come through. We used to stand and watch the convoys coming through and ... lots of spending, you know, post-war money, you know, chaps are buying motor cars or whatever, spending, buying houses while they had lots of money. But that freedom didn't last very long, because I think after about the early '50s then the pinch came, you know, the post-war piss up is now over, money is now hard and you've got to get yourself a bloody job, and jobs weren't all that easy. There were a lot of guys trying to get back to the bloody army or the Air Force or whatever, but they weren't all successful. But the job market wasn't that easy, wasn't that easy at all. So many buggers coming back, all crying for the same thing, they all wanted too much money, man... In those days the employment ads in the paper were quite prolific, you know, there was a sales rep wanted here and a sales rep wanted there, £60 a month. Hell £60 a month, you know. And I applied for it and I got it and from there I never looked back... One (job) to the other was always a little bit higher up as far as finances were concerned but basically the same principles.'²

'... So all in all I did about 4 years 311 days, just short of 5 years ... and that was my lot and I came out and I went to technical college to brush up on my matric and I went to university hoping to be a bloody engineer like my father was. I

² Interview: R.D. pp 13-14

got as far as my second year and then mathematics killed me, so I said, "No, stuff it". And then I became a hawker on the road. I've been on the road all my life... We got a little pisspot gratuity and then when I said I wanted to go to university there was a thing there called the Governor General's War Fund, and it was ... £200 a year or some bloody thing, and I ended up living in Belsen, I think they call it Driekoppen now, it's on De Waal drive. It's an ex-serviceman's place there. We were the foundation members. I lived there for 2 years and then as I say I got as far as my second year and then I packed it up because I coped with all the subjects with the exception of pure maths, the applied maths was no problem, but the pure maths I realised, Donnelly forget it boy. Despite the fact that half of what you learn you learn to forget anyway, but mathematics is an essential in engineering. I just didn't get it. It broke my bloody heart, but now I became a *smous*, in Afrikaans, which means a hawker, I've been a commercial rep, I've travelled millions of miles selling all sorts of bloody things³. I had about 5 jobs, I wasn't jumping from job to job, I mean one job was 10, another was 15. I was reasonably stable... Some buggers they said, "We're going to sit and wait till the job comes our way", but I knew what I wanted to do. And I was a bit insistent you know, I said, "Look man, please don't keep me all the bloody time, there's an

³ The informant sold products for several different companies, always as a travelling rep, and mainly in the Cape Province. In different jobs he sold truck parts, medical goods and Coca-Cola amongst others. Interview: R.D. p 9

ex-serviceman's thing going for ..." We had to go to technical college for a year just to brush up on our matric, that was in '47, just to catch up on what you had forgotten, you know, '46, '46 that's right. then '47, '48 I was in Belsen and, ag, happy years, you know, lovely crowd, but, as I say, you know, academically you know I realised that you don't fart against thunder any more. When you haven't got it, you haven't got it. So I let it go, rightly or wrongly so, but that was it... (UCT) were very helpful, I mean they knew that we had this Governor General's War Fund they called it, and they gave us accommodation at Belsen. They paid the fees, and then we got an allowance from the Governor General's War Fund of about 8, £9 a bloody month. It was very liberal. I mean all your booze and cigarettes you pay for yourself, but your accommodation was paid for.'⁴

⁴ Interview: R.D. pp 5-7

Many of the soldiers returning to South Africa at the end of the War were in need of immediate work. While some returned to the jobs they had before joining up, others were forced onto the job market. It was the government's intention to make this search as easy as possible - many jobs, especially in the civil service were reserved for veterans - but they could not always take into account the wishes of the veterans themselves.

As indicated above, there was a generous allowance for white veterans who wanted to study, and many did take up this option. Those who returned to pre-War jobs generally stayed in them for long periods of time⁵, but few other interviewees settled down immediately to one job. Once in the workplace, many found it very hard to adjust to civilian work. As will be seen, this is not explicitly expressed by many of the veterans in interviews, but rather, as above, by mentioning many different jobs that were held in a short period of time.

The most common image of the early post-War economy in South Africa is that of the Age of Austerity - a term which originated from Britain where the economy was still suffering from the effects of the War, both because of the physical devastation the conflict had caused and because of the financial effects of loans taken to fund the War.

⁵ See for examples interviews: H.B., J.E., R.M., E.I.

Some of the veterans also referred to the post-War period as the age of austerity in interviews⁶, although the country was not suffering negative effects from the War as seriously as was Britain. Indeed, the South African economy flourished in the years after the War. The growth that had begun before 1939, and which the War had fuelled, continued into the 1950s.

By contrast, in early post-war Britain, people lived under very heavy restrictions, and coped with severe shortages for a considerable time. While people were expecting conditions to improve, they all knew that it would be some time before rationing was dropped and goods became generally available again:

'The housewife knew she would have to be patient a little longer, whipping up her mock cream from cornflour and margarine; but there was a good time coming soon. Well, fairly soon.'⁷

In the meantime, restrictions on the population were very strict. Indeed bread rationing was only introduced after the War. Whereas previously people had been able to fill up on bread to make up for the shortage of other foods, now even bread was restricted, and the government tried to make people think they were buying more than they were by shrinking the size of a loaf⁸. While the

⁶ Interviews: H.B. p 62; S.W. p 38

⁷ S. Cooper - 'Snoek piquante' in M. Sissons & P. French - *Age of Austerity, 1945-1951* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986) p 23

⁸ S. Cooper - 'Snoek piquante' pp 26-7

average food ration in Britain was smaller in 1948 than it had been during the War, companies were nonetheless preparing for better times. Advertising was to play upon hopes of better things to come in an effort to keep corporate names in the consumption sphere:

'Won't it be nice when we have lovely lingerie, and Lux to look after our pretty things?'⁹.

In South Africa, however, the situation was altogether different. A fairly plentiful supply of fresh foodstuffs was maintained throughout the War, and indeed there was a surplus of fruit, as Axis governments stopped buying South African products. In 1939, there were fears about the effects of this over supply on Cape farmers, until the government decided that the surplus would either be sold to the consumer or canned. A subsidy of £400 000 was required to assist farmers¹⁰. Petrol was limited, and white bread was not allowed to be made or sold, to cut down on waste¹¹. Such restrictions as there were, however, were lifted in 1947. Although there were limited allocations (rice, butter, meat), food was never actually rationed by coupon in South Africa, although there were plans to introduce restrictions after the War, which were dropped in 1946 when the government acknowledged that shortages were not going to be as profound as

⁹ *Mirror*, 4.1.46 quoted in S. Cooper - 'Snoek piquante' p 25

¹⁰ *Cape Argus* 4.10.39

¹¹ Interview: J.W. p 13

it had expected¹².

That the period after the War in South Africa is remembered by veterans as the Age of Austerity may be an indication of the level of cultural transmission that occurred between Britain and South Africa. While there were continuing shortages of some products in South Africa - most importantly rice - there was never the same level of hardship that there was in Britain. Despite this, the assumption is made in popular memory that what was happening in metropolitan Britain must have been occurring here, as if in surrogate sympathy with Britain's struggles.

In reality, the situation in South Africa was very different to that of Britain. One of the interviewees, who lived in Britain immediately after the War, described the very noticeable differences he and his family experienced upon their return to South Africa. His daughter, who was meeting her grandparents for the first time, flatly refused to take more than one of the sweets which her grandfather was offering to her:

'Mum said, "Will you have another one?", and she said "No thank you Granny". She said again, "Would you like another sweet?", and she said, "No thank you Granny". My mother was most upset and said to my father, "Go and get something different, I don't think she likes these ones". I said, "No Mum it's not that. She's been used to one sweet in the evening. Her ration was the

¹² Mayoral Minute 1947, p 3

one sweet in the evening". My mother was so upset¹³.

There were some durable items that were hard to come by in the shops in Cape Town, but no great hardships were caused by these shortages. As one female veteran recalled:

'The stock only started coming back in about '47. You'd occasionally get something in. Those terrible rayon stockings that came from South America, and then the feet used to come away from the uppers. Fabric was scarce. The South African clothes factories were making uniforms, there wasn't the fashion clothing that there is now. Clothes were imported from England or you made your own. Soap was scarce, and so was tea. Those were the only things really.'¹⁴

Cape Town was to experience economic growth during this period with new industries opening every year in the city. The number of manufacturing establishments in the Western Cape grew steadily, from just over 1 400 in 1946 to 1 582 in 1952, an increase of around 13%. There was a decrease in the number of firms in 1953. This growth period was, however, to slow down during 1953, as the end of the Korean War saw the world economy slump temporarily¹⁵, before growth continued again in 1954¹⁶.

¹³ Interview: C. & E. H. p 33

¹⁴ Interview: J.W. pp 20-1

¹⁵ van der Wee, - *Prosperity and Upheaval: world economy 1945-1980* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986) pp 355-357

¹⁶ Bureau of Statistics - *Industrial Censuses 1950-1 to 1960-1, summary report - manufacturing*. (Report IC 69). Office of Census and Statistics - *Census of Industrial Establishments 1946-7* (UG 63/1950) and *Census of Industrial Establishments 1947-48, 1948-49, 1949-50* (UG 30/1954)

The unusual growth which the War had fostered was, however, over by 1953, and most of the informants began to experience more difficulty in obtaining jobs and in having to cope with declining real earnings.

The wartime economy in Cape Town had been buttressed by the huge amount of public work taking place usually under the orders of the Department of Defence. The building, conversion and maintenance of military installations, vessels and factories had ensured a steady supply of work for many in Cape Town. With the end of the War, however, it was no longer necessary to have so many people employed in military-based occupations - even the reconversion of ships to peace-time use was largely complete by 1947, meaning less work was available in the docks¹⁷.

The City Council had also reduced the amount of work in progress under the control of the City Engineer by the middle of the War. Work in progress at the end of 1940 was valued at just over £3m. By 1945, this figure had fallen by almost 50% to £1 510 000¹⁸.

It would take a long time for work emanating from the City Council to return to pre-war levels. The City Council did, however, resume the development of the Foreshore area immediately

¹⁷ S.D. Mentz - 'Civil history of the War' in Department of Manpower Papers, box 3

¹⁸ Mayoral Minute 1945, p 6

after the War ended. Although the land had been largely reclaimed before 1939, this project had been put on hold for the duration of the War. It was only after 1945 that building on the Foreshore commenced¹⁹. Work also began on the development of the Vredehoek/Highlands area, and in Sea Point²⁰. Such projects were to be important in restoring the City Council's expenditure in the City in the post-War period.

Private industry experienced growth after the War, with the number of manufacturing establishments rising steadily until 1953. The decline in the number of firms in 1953, and the subsequent fall in wage growth and employment marked the end of the initial post-War boom in Cape Town.

Table 1: Manufacturing Establishments - Western Cape Urban²¹

	Firms	Wages (£000)	Wages /Firm	% Change in W/firm
1950-51	1 560	47 754	30 611	-
1951-52	1 582	53 854	34 041	11.2
1952-53	1 540	59 112	38 384	12.75
1953-54	1 562	62 911	40 275	4.9
1954-55	1 564	66 517	42 530	5.6

¹⁹ Interview: J.W. p 3

²⁰ Interview: J.W. p 36

²¹ Bureau of Statistics - Industrial Censuses 1950-51 to 1960-61.
Summary Report - Manufacturing (Report IC 69)

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²¹ Bureau of Statistics - Industrial Censuses 1950-51 to 1960-61.
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The statistics for the years 1945-1950 are not broken down sufficiently to include in the table above. All that is available are figures for the whole of the Western Cape region, which show a steady growth for the period from 1 501 firms in 1945 to 1 928 in 1950²², a growth of over 28%. Table 1 shows that rapid growth in the number of firms in the Western Cape continued until 1952-3, while the total amount paid in wages and the average wage bill of each firm continued to rise throughout the period.

The slowing down of the economy in 1953 was part of a world-wide trend which followed the end of the Korean War. Cuts in defence budgets in the Western world were to precipitate a global slump, which was only mitigated by the massive house building programmes which many countries undertook²³.

The brief rise in unemployment rates following the end of the War, when some workers were displaced by returning soldiers, ended in 1948, when unemployment fell quite rapidly. With fewer people unemployed, real wage rates began to rise, as labour was at a premium. Gradually, however, real wage growth slowed in the early 1950s when unemployment began to rise again. As can be seen in Table 1, the percentage change in wages paid by each firm

²² Office of Census and Statistics - Census of Industrial Establishments, 1946-47 (UG 63/1950). Office of Census and Statistics - Census of Industrial Statistics, 1947-48, 1948-49 and 1949-50 (UG 30/1954)

²³ H. van der Wee - *Prosperity and Upheaval* p 67

illustrates this decline in the growth of real wages which workers experienced.

Table 2: Real Wage Growth and Unemployment²⁴

Here, the inverse relationship between the growth rate of real wages and unemployment is shown quite clearly, with wage growth rising when unemployment falls, making labour relatively scarce, and hence more expensive. Unfortunately, accurate employment figures for Cape Town in this period are not available, so it is not possible to ascertain a reliable rate of unemployment, and the incompatibility of the statistics that were published makes estimates meaningless.

²⁴ Real wage statistics from *Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa* vol. 27, 1952-53 p 308, and vol 28, 1954-55 p 192. Unemployment statistics, which show the number of registered unemployed at the Department of Labour (later Manpower) employment exchanges on 31 December of the year in question, from *Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa* vol 24, 1948 p 264; vol. 25, 1949 p 276; vol. 26, 1950-51 p 284, and; vol. 27, 1952-53 p 274

In an attempt to make sure that veterans were not left without trade qualifications or a skill at the end of the War, a training scheme was established for those who did not find work or go to university. This scheme only involved a small fraction of the returning soldiers, as for the majority re-employment in their old work was guaranteed by the Soldiers and War Workers Employment Act of 1944. By the end of 1948, only 1 000 veterans remained to be 'discharged to civilian employment'²⁵.

This does not mean that all veterans who went through this training system were permanently placed in work. The Act only guaranteed employment for twelve months, and those who were taken into training schemes did not all pass successfully, and were subsequently left to their own devices.

For example, training was offered to white and coloured veterans in all the major branches of artisanship, and trade tests were taken at the end of a period of training. By the end of 1948, when the training programme was almost complete, 3 644 veterans had applied to take the various trade tests which would have qualified them as artisans in the fields of engineering, motor engineering, building, furniture, or 'other trades'. Of these veterans, however, only 1 150 passed, less than a third of all

²⁵ *Year Book of the Union* vol.27, 1952-1953 p 308

applicants²⁶.

Much of the employment for those who returned to Cape Town without a job was to be found in government departments. All branches of public service were expected to take on their share of ex-volunteers. Plans to make sure that government employment was open to veterans were already in place before the end of the War. In December 1944, General Smuts had ordered that the Secretary for Labour should be notified of 'the details of all posts that departments intended filling' so that the government knew exactly how many veterans could be channelled into their employ²⁷. By the end of the War, over 14 000 vacancies in government departments had been reserved in this fashion. Over 10 000 of these were reserved for white men²⁸.

For the thousands who did enter government service for the first time at the end of the War, the conditions were particularly favourable. Under the terms of the Public Servants (Military Service) Act of 1944, veterans were given an adjusted starting salary, which placed the ex-soldier in 'a position not less favourable than he would have enjoyed had he entered the

²⁶ *Year Book of the Union* vol. 27, 1952-1953 p 308

²⁷ *Johannesburg Star* 27.12.44

²⁸ *Government employment for the ex-volunteer* p 1. This document is a pamphlet which was given to returning soldiers to assist them in their search for work. (No publication details)

government service in a grade of entry on the date when he first entered military service'²⁹.

For coloured veterans, the number of jobs in the public service was rather more restricted. The colour bar in government departments meant that for coloured veterans to be employed, special dispensations had to be given by the government to permit their employment. While several departments could take on veterans, the Post Office, the Department of Irrigation, the Department of Social Welfare and the Police were specifically requested by the Coloured Ex-Volunteers Commission to 'open their doors slightly'³⁰ to allow in coloured veterans.

The Post Office allowed coloured veterans in as postal assistants in 'predominantly Coloured areas'³¹, while the Police established a special training depot in Cape Town for coloured ex-volunteers³². The Department of Irrigation allowed coloured veterans to become artisans within the department after undergoing a period of in-house training³³.

²⁹ Public Servants (Military Service) Act N° 27, 1944

³⁰ Public Servants (Military Service) Act N° 27, 1944

³¹ Coloured Ex-Volunteers Committee, §33 p 10

³² Coloured Ex-Volunteers Committee, §38 p 11

³³ Coloured Ex-volunteer's Committee, §38 p 11

Beyond these limited places for coloured veterans, the only recommendation that the Coloured Ex-volunteers Committee made was that industry be required to engage a quota of coloured veterans³⁴. Such a system was never put into practice, however. The idea seems to have been written off almost immediately - alongside this recommendation in one copy of the report of the Committee is the hand-written comment 'Vide Factories Act - no segregation of races!'³⁵.

Soldiers returning to Cape Town from the War expected to be able to find work easily. This expectation was based largely upon frequent promises by the various government officials who had visited the troops in Italy and the Western Desert that they would be well looked after when they returned.³⁶ The government's demobilisation scheme had indeed guaranteed that no soldier would be demobilised until suitable employment had been secured³⁷.

The perception that finding jobs would be easy for veterans was also based on the knowledge the troops had of the industrial

³⁴ Coloured Ex-volunteers Committee, §90 p 20

³⁵ Coloured Ex-volunteers Committee, p 20. This copy of the report is held in UCT's African Studies Library. No clue is given as to the identity of the author of the footnote, although it does appear to be contemporary to the document's publication

³⁶ Interview: B.G. p 37

³⁷ F. Oosthuizen - 'Demobilisation' p 73

growth of the Union during the War, and the understandable assumption that ex-soldiers would be given preferential treatment over those who had stayed behind.

For many of the sample these expectations were met. Most of those who did not have pre-war jobs to return to were able to find work without any difficulty. Due to the more commercial nature of the Cape Town economy compared to other regions, none needed to go through government channels in order to find work. Indeed, only two of those interviewed had to go through a selection process in order to find a job - all the rest were placed because of someone they knew who was in a position to offer them work. One of the veterans was found a place in the Stock Exchange by his father³⁸, while fathers and relatives were instrumental in finding work for many of the others³⁹. One of the veterans was offered a job when on his honeymoon by an old Navy acquaintance:

'So he said to me ... "Look, I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm on my way to Cape Town now by car, but you go down to the Reverend R.F. Jones and tell him ... I have a post at my school, a vacancy at my school, tell him to give you that vacancy". So I got the job'⁴⁰.

If you wanted to get a job, using networks of contacts was the

³⁸ Interview: B.R. pp 25-26

³⁹ See for example interviews: D.A. p 18; P.M. p 31

⁴⁰ Interview: R.F. p 7

method employed by almost all interviewees - mostly in a much more forward manner than in the excerpt quoted above. It was quite normal to write to someone you knew who was in a position to provide employment. For many of the social elite this method of job hunting provided more than one offer of work:

'I wanted to leave, and my best friend was a member of the family that makes Joko - Benton and Mitchell - the Mitchell boy, I was friends with, and his father and uncle were stockbrokers. When I say my best friend, he had been my friend from prep school, we went to Switzerland together, we were in the army together and married girls who were also friends. Anyway, ... the head of the company offered me a job, which I accepted, and not more than a week or so after I had accepted this, one of my other letters that I'd written came back, and it was something that I thought sounded more interesting and better. So I turned down the Mitchell job. One of my other letters that I'd written was to the head of Syfrets, the then head of Syfrets called Clive Corder ... he was a friend of my father's and a friend of mine.'⁴¹

Many of the veterans had more than one job offer - some turning down as many as three or four posts before taking work - all of which indicates that work was easy to find. Many of the veterans also went through several jobs and careers in the five years after leaving the armed forces. None of them felt that if they left one job they would find it hard to come by another:

'I didn't like (the Stock Exchange). I just decided

⁴¹ Interview: B.R. p 24

that it wasn't for me, so I left, and I looked around for something else to do.'⁴²

While for some this job changing was part of a process of improving their working status, for others it was symptomatic of the difficulty they were having in settling down to civilian life:

'I was fortunate in that I had an understanding wife, so she helped, but it was different, particularly because I hadn't been a civilian employee before ... I had nothing to go back to because I was in a new environment, a new milieu ... And I must admit, I must confess that I never really enjoyed my work in civil life, because in the RAF at the time there was a very well defined, very definite attitude of loyalty to the service, to your companions and comrades, and when I got into civil life these things didn't apply at all, as a matter of fact you almost had to cut the next bloke's throat to climb one rung up the ladder to get a promotion ... But that's the thing with the services, it is your life ... It's not just a job, but these other things were just a job.'⁴³

While only one of them expressed this restlessness explicitly, other veterans hinted that the adjustment to working in the civilian world was harder than they had anticipated. Work was generally unsatisfying, and many were in search of something more meaningful than what was offered by the work place:

⁴² Interview: B.R. p 26

⁴³ Interview: C. & E.H. p 2

'Well I looked at flying (but) the pay they offered me as a pilot, there was no way I was going it seemed so little. Then I joined the (unclear) group as a clerk. And I got fed up of that, so I thought I'd better go fishing. So I went fishing.'⁴⁴

Life in the armed forces has undoubtedly been romanticised by all the informants. The descriptions of the tedium and routine of the War, examined in Chapter Three, are not consistent with the memories of freedom, responsibility and 'all the excitement'⁴⁵ that many considered to have been part of life in the forces. This romanticisation does not, however, necessarily appear to have been the product of long years of reminiscence. For many of the informants, who found settling down to work very difficult because the 'excitement' of the War could not be duplicated in civilian employment, reminiscence about their War experiences probably began almost immediately upon their return. Work was seen as a dull necessity by many of those returning to Cape Town, and several of the interviewees could produce a list of five or six firms they worked for in as many years after the War⁴⁶.

The availability of large sums of cash from gratuities and pay remitted back to the Union and the ability to change jobs with

⁴⁴ Interview: D.A. p 18

⁴⁵ Interview: P.M. p 31

⁴⁶ For examples see interviews: P.M. p 31; D.A. p 18; B.R. pp 26-28; C. & E.H. pp 2, 11-12, 37

relative ease, meant that some veterans experienced greater economic freedom than they did in the years after 1953. As the economy slowed down, prices rose and jobs became harder to find in the 1950s, more and more the veterans were forced to remain in the work they had, and large scale purchases such as houses and cars became harder to make:

'That freedom didn't last very long, because I think after about the early '50s then the pinch came, you know, the post-war piss up is now over, money is now hard and you've got to get yourself a bloody job, and jobs weren't all that easy.'⁴⁷

While staying in work became a necessity, many of the veterans still found the routine of working life tedious, and looked back with great fondness on the years they spent in the armed forces and the freedom and excitement that they felt the War had given them. As one ex-pilot recalled, leaving the Air Force was 'a big break':

'Every time an aircraft flew over I used to just sit down and watch it.'⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Interview: R.D. p 5

⁴⁸ Interview: C. & E.H. p 12

CHAPTER 6

'Basically, I was a Smuts man.

I was thinking on the same
principles that he'd set out'¹:
Politics, nationalism and responses

¹ Interview: S.M. p 12

'Jean and I were very much involved with the Torch Commando and Sailor Malan. And the United Party with Jan Smuts. That (defeat) was the result of the War, I'm sure it was. While we had been away the hard Nationalists, the Malanites, had more than enough opportunity to school their people, to talk their people into believing what they were teaching, you know, the *swart gevaar*, that was their cry, and they had whipped them up to a solid force. Whereas the chaps came back from the army, we grumbled, we got browned off, we were fed up. There was always somebody to blame. And a hang of a lot of them, I think, not so much perhaps the English-speaking people in the army, but certainly maybe the Afrikaans-speaking chaps, I knew quite a lot of them who had joined and had not received a letter from their family the whole time they were away because they split the family, they signed up and took a red tab², and the other side of the family said, "You know, you're a vyand now" and that was it. And those chaps, you see, they were bitter, they went back, and they probably went back to their families, they could have had a slant. There were chaps that always had a gripe on their shoulders, like we are today anti-government, anti- something else. And like they did in Britain when they chucked Churchill out and they came back here and they said, "Well, that's the end of Lilly". And they

² The red tabs were worn on the shoulders of the uniforms of South African soldiers who had taken the 'anywhere in Africa' oath, and later the 'anywhere in the world' oaths. Wearing red tabs signified support for the War effort - there were many soldiers in the army at the outbreak of the War who refused to take the oaths because of their opposition to South African participation in the War.

just didn't vote for him. He was the figurehead that they said no to. It wasn't a case of "Well it was the South African Party", I think it was just that they'd had enough of army control, and they were just fed up, I'm sure of it. And the two together were enough to just swing it round the wrong way. It was a disaster, you know, I'm saying now what I thought all along. The day they had that 1948 election and the South African Party lost to the Nationalists, we stood in the office, at the office and we had one Afrikaans-speaking chap and he was, he was doubtful, but the rest of us, and there was one major, who'd been a major in the Cape Town Highlanders, his words that day were, "This has put the country back 40 years". I mean he said it then, and I mean what's it done, I mean the proof is there today, it's proved itself. Consequently, after that election, there was the Torch Commando. We actually went on a march up Adderley Street and down St George's Street. But before the election we got very highly involved and we started going to election meetings because we formed a big group, it was really arranged by the Torch Commando. We were living here³ then and a whole group of chaps from Fish Hoek and that would get into motor cars and we'd go off to Parow to a meeting because it was a South African Party meeting. And we'd all tear out there and fill up the first 10 rows, so that these blokes could only heckle from the back, and I mean it ended up in fights and all sorts of things. We had a hell of a time.

³ The informant lived in Fish Hoek from before the War

And I can remember going to Stellenbosch University, the same thing, and Senator Conroy⁴ was going to speak, and you know, and he'd been in the Boer War and all this sort of thing with Jan Smuts and all, so these chaps were a real red rag to any Afrikaner bull. So we got in cars and off we went to Stellenbosch university and we packed the front of the hall. And these guys, all these students standing in the back, they were shouting and going on and they were saying, "We want Conroy, we want Conroy", and they were going to give him hell, they were going to really have him, you know. And then he came in and he stood up. I remember him saying this, he said, "Right, you've been shouting all night for me", and then he spoke, in Afrikaans, and he said, "You've been calling for me all night, now you've got me, sit down and listen to what I'm telling you". And they all, for some reason they shut up for ten minutes, it was a bit silent, you know, but even then, I mean these things used to end up ... we had to fight our way out of these halls and things and disappear. It was quite a hectic period.'⁵

⁴ Senator Conroy had been a staunch supporter of Smuts throughout his political career. He had been involved with Smuts in raids on the Cape Colony during the South African War.

⁵ Interview: H.B. pp 63-67

Soldiers returning at the end of the War found themselves thrust into a society in political turmoil. Nationalist organisation had been very effective in their absence, and they were faced with a severe threat to the political structures for which many came to feel they had fought. As is shown in the interview extract just quoted, some veterans became involved in organisations to try to counter the rapid rise of the National party. For some, this meant taking part in violent demonstrations and breaking up meetings, for others participation in politics was through more formal party political structures. The majority, however, took no part in what was happening, choosing to leave political activity to those who were more interested. This apathy was to intensify in the years after the 1948 election.

Political activity among returning soldiers was, at best, low key and short lived. Despite the volatile political climate to which they returned, few of the veterans took up the challenge offered by the growth of the nationalist movement even in the way indicated in the interview above. The Torch Commando - a veterans' organisation formed around the issue of the coloured franchise - failed to outlive the poor health of its leader, Sailor Malan and the 1953 election defeat, and most 'members' only took part in one march in 1951, while parliamentary political organisation crumbled after the UP defeat in 1948.

Although Smuts and the UP had won the 1943 'khaki' election with relative ease, the electorate was by no means united behind the government at the end of the War. The National Party had been working to secure a greatly increased level of public support, and had emerged from the election as the 'sole nationalist body with any political credibility'⁶. In the period 1943-1948 there was to be an increase in the polarisation of political opinions and support throughout South Africa, which often led to violence. More than one of the veterans in this study was involved in 'Nat bashing', and violence was used by both sides of the central political spectrum to disrupt meetings and destabilise the opposition. Outside of political meetings, groups from opposing sides went out looking for trouble with their opponents as political activity moved into the realm of civil disturbance:

'We drove to Piketberg ... hoping to have an ex-servicemen's meeting. There was this one bloody pub ... from here to this wall we sat, and then there was a blank space of about ten feet and then the *boere* sat this side. Just watching us. Waiting for some bugger to start any performance and then there would have been a real fucking war there'⁷.

The primary feature of the political climate into which the veterans returned was the beginnings of the failure of moderate South African political liberalism, which was to be essentially

⁶ D. O'Meara - *Volkskapitalisme* p 133

⁷ Interview: R.D. p 9

complete by the 1960s⁸. Although white liberal politics was to maintain power bases after this date - most notably in the press and on certain university campuses - there was to be little effective liberal opposition to Nationalist rule⁹. The features of this decline can be identified in ordinary perceptions in the immediate post-War period. Even as early as 1948, after only one election defeat, United Party workers had already begun to despair of ever winning another election:

'We just used to sit there and say, "Isn't there something we can think of just to make the United Party popular again?"'¹⁰

This feeling of gloom and despondency was not confined to veterans. On the night that the election results were being announced, Helen Suzman¹¹ recalls a similar feeling of helplessness:

'It soon became evident that Smuts's United Party government was defeated and that the National Party was in. Utter gloom pervaded our group. I thought despairingly: we will never get the Nats out'¹².

⁸ This process is described in H. Adam - 'The failure of political liberalism' in H. Adam & H. Giliomee - *Ethnic Power Mobilised: can South Africa change?* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979) pp 264ff

⁹ F. Oosthuizen - 'Demobilisation' p 129

¹⁰ Interview: J.W. p 27

¹¹ Helen Suzman was MP for Houghton in Johannesburg from 1953-1989. Initially a member of the United Party, she left the party in 1959 in protest against the Party's acceptance of land allocations to Africans. She was one of the founder members of the Progressive Party, and for 13 years from 1961-1974 was the Progressive Party's only MP.

¹² H. Suzman - *In No Uncertain Terms: memoirs* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1993) p 15

The causes of the rapid collapse of Smuts's 'centrist and armed forces constituency'¹³ are to be found both inside and outside the United Party. Before the election, nationalists had attacked UP policy, particularly on Native affairs, as 'weak and vacillating'¹⁴, while in contrast the National Party was proposing firm policy objectives. In particular, the National Party used to its advantage white fears of the *oorstrooming* of the cities, which it saw as the inevitable consequence of United Party policy¹⁵.

The United Party was also in part responsible for its own downfall, however. Smuts had become one of the elevated statesmen of his time. His Allied prestige during the War was very high, and he was to be important in the formation of the United Nations. The electorate, however, did not think that he was sufficiently in touch with local issues. Having been so involved with world war strategy and politics, 'he was more at home with the broad international issues than with the bread and Broeder politics at home'¹⁶. The negative views held of Smuts and his domestic policies rendered the United Party incapable of slowing

¹³ W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1994) p 134

¹⁴ D. O'Meara - *Volkskapitalisme* p 246

¹⁵ D. O'Meara - *Volkskapitalisme* p 243

¹⁶ D. Harrison - *The White Tribe of Africa* p 151

the growth of the 'strong undercurrent of hostility'¹⁷ which had grown up between those who had supported South Africa's participation in the War, and those who had opposed it.

Equally, there are two common myths about the reasons for Smuts's downfall, and the political activities of veterans in the post-war period, which need to be dispelled. Firstly, among the veterans of this study there is a clear belief that it was returning soldiers who voted Smuts out of power in the 1948 election. This opinion was expressed in several interviews:

'Churchill lost the election, Smuts lost the election. Why? It's because none of the soldiers voted for them, because after the War they did nothing for them.'¹⁸

'Well, the same bloody thing happened here. The returned soldiers were dissatisfied to a large degree with what was existing. They didn't get farms for nothing, because the ones who stayed behind had got the best jobs, and this caused a lot of resentment among the ex-soldiers, and that's one of the reasons why the Nats won the election.'¹⁹

This opinion is supported by commentators, such as Helen Suzman²⁰ and historians, such as Davenport²¹, who naturally

¹⁷ K. Ingham - *Jan Christian Smuts* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1986) p 243

¹⁸ Interview: G.d.J. p 13

¹⁹ Interview: S.W. p 14

²⁰ H. Suzman - *In No Uncertain Terms* p 16

cite the influx of Africans into urban areas to take part in industrial production during the War as a cause of this disillusionment. In this portrayal, veterans returned to the cities to find their once safe jobs threatened by this influx - an unwelcome phenomenon which the National Party promised to reverse. Smuts was thus unaware of the 'level of discontent among the returned soldiers'²² who felt that they should have had their jobs protected to a greater extent by both the demobilisation process and continued segregation in South African society²³:

'White labour felt understandably threatened; during the War the absence of so many of their number had opened up numerous opportunities to blacks, especially in the semi-skilled sector. The veterans returned to unemployment, concluding that there had been an erosion of segregation at their expense'²⁴.

Such firm conclusions are not supported by the oral testimony of the veterans interviewed for this dissertation. Some did claim that other veterans, perhaps those outside of Cape Town and the influence of its 'Liberal' image, were disillusioned with Smuts after the War because of the failure of the demobilisation system to meet their expectations. None of those interviewed, however,

²¹ T. Davenport - *South Africa* p 322

²² F. Oosthuizen - 'Demobilisation' p 132

²³ H. Suzman - *In No Uncertain Terms* p 16

²⁴ P. Furlong - *Between Crown and Swastika* p 238

experienced such disaffection themselves²⁵. While one was disappointed with his treatment at the end of the War, the rest of the white interviewees in the sample all considered that, as far as they were concerned, the government's demobilisation package was at worst fair, and at best generous:

'The South African government were very generous. They gave chaps grants to study, especially if you'd started off in your varsity career before you left, you applied for a grant to finish it. And they would supply guys with tools. The government was very generous. Because they were all whites, you see'²⁶.

The single veteran in the interview sample who did feel that he had been mistreated by the demobilisation system did not attribute this in any way to the threat posed to his job security by the increase in the urban African working population. Instead, he considered the government to have short changed him through incompetent provision. He complained that the tools which should have been his due after the War were all sold by the government, and they had not made any allocation to ensure that there would be tools available in shops for purchase with the voucher he was given for this purpose²⁷. And, most importantly, these circumstances did not cause him to withdraw his support from General Smuts or the United Party.

²⁵ See for example interview: G.d.J p 12

²⁶ Interview: P.M. pp 22-3

²⁷ Interview: B.G. p 32

Indeed, this veteran still identified himself strongly with General Smuts, as did all of those interviewed. In many interviews the phrases 'I am basically a Smuts man'²⁸, or 'Jannie Smuts was a good man'²⁹ were repeated in one form or another. One veteran even went as far as to call him 'our hero and god'³⁰.

Part of this reverence for Smuts was linked to his role as Commander in Chief of the South African forces during the War, but there is also an identification of Jan Smuts as a representative of the social group to which the veterans saw themselves as belonging. Despite his role in the South African War, Smuts had come to represent close ties with Britain, and a strong pro-Empire anti-Nationalism. It was these aspects of the General's political image which drew veterans to support him. More particularly, the Anglocentric nature of English-speaking South Africa found a focal point in Smuts. He was in one sense identified strongly with Churchill as the hero of the nation's War, a comparison which was to become more striking when both lost post-War elections:

'We heard this on the ship coming back and we couldn't believe it, the man who quite literally dragged Britain up from the bootstrings, that they would throw

²⁸ Interview: S.M. p 12

²⁹ Interview: R.F. p 14

³⁰ Interview: R.D. p 8

him out. Well the same bloody thing happened here.'³¹

The visit of King George VI in 1947 once again saw a surge in pro-British feeling, with Smuts once more at the centre of this:

'Judy and I danced at the City Hall (when) what is now Queen Elizabeth danced with the Mayor of Cape Town and Jannie Smuts. That was one of the great events in Cape Town after the War'³².

The second, opposing myth is that veterans supported Smuts because of his perceived liberalism. Here, contrary to the view of those, like Furlong³³, who argue that soldiers removed their support from Smuts, historians such as Beinart³⁴ claim that the soldiers supported Smuts and his moves towards decreased racial segregation. This was because they had been away to war and had been in contact with members of more racially liberal societies³⁵. According to this theory, the fact that soldiers had been fighting the 'war for democracy against Fascism'³⁶ was central to their constitutionally protective opposition to the National Party government after 1948.

³¹ Interview: S.W. p 15

³² Interview: S.W. p 29

³³ P. Furlong - *Between Crown and Swastika* p 238

³⁴ W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* p 130

³⁵ See for example W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* pp 130-

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³⁶ W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* p 144

Both contact with other societies and the motives for the support Smuts enjoyed from veterans, should be questioned in this case, as well as the level of active opposition which this argument implies on the part of the veterans. It does not seem that troops had very much contact with soldiers from other countries, and especially not from other cultures - certainly not enough to change political beliefs. Contact with other troops was very limited for South Africans; most only met British troops in the Western Desert and Americans, from their own segregated army, in Italy. Contact between white and black troops in the South African armed forces was restricted to very few of those serving. Ultimately, dislike of the Nationalists amongst veterans did not necessarily originate in new-found disdain for their policies, nor in a strong belief in a more integrated South Africa. The strongest feelings of opposition to the National Party were caused by the fact that some of its leaders, who were to form the Cabinet in 1948, were interned during the War for their pro-Nazi sympathies. It is here that the full distrust of the nationalist movement has its roots among ex-soldiers:

'I loathe politics. But what turned my stomach against the Nationalist government at the time when they came to power in 1948 was the fact that these OB blokes who were interned - like old John Vorster and all those people - were now in power. They were paid a gratuity for the time that they were incarcerated'³⁷.

³⁷ Interview: J.E. p 35

For others, the sense of utter distaste at the past of the new government was to lead them to make public statements about their beliefs:

'A fellow called Bosch ... had brought back a complete Gestapo uniform. How he got it I don't know, but he had the gun belt, the jack boots, the lot, swastika. The day that Dr Malan was opening parliament, Bosch says to us that he's going to stand on De Waal Drive. He went and put on his bloody Gestapo gear ... and as D.F. fucking Malan came past in his cavalcade, he screamed, "Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil"'³⁸.

Just as Smuts was supported by the Cape Town veterans for his pro-British stance, the National Party government was reviled for its anti-imperial propaganda and for its attitudes to those who took part in the War:

'In 1948 the Nationalist government came in, who at that stage were very anti-British and very pro-Afrikaans. During the War they'd been blowing up pylons and bridges and that sort of thing. So I found myself in a very hostile environment'³⁹.

Once the election was won, the National Party set about securing its hold on power. This was done not least through the dispensing of patronage: placing Afrikaners in the civil service, creating more Afrikaner magistrates and judges, as well as parliamentary measures - six new seats were created in parliament to represent

³⁸ Interview: R.D. p 7

³⁹ Interview: C.H. p 12

South West Africa in order to increase the Nationalist majority in the House. The Defence Force also underwent great changes after 1948, with many of Smuts's staunchest supporters and the most famous names from the recent War being either removed from office completely or else placed in new, less important areas. General Poole, for example, who had commanded the very successful 6th Division 'found his position of Deputy Chief of the General Staff abolished'⁴⁰. He was posted to Germany - well out of the way of the new government and the new heads of the Union Defence Force.

This process was to seal the fate of liberal politics in South Africa for some time to come. Although opposition parties maintained a majority of votes in the 1953 election, the number of seats they held had decreased, giving the National Party what amounted to a free hand in legislation by the beginning of the 1960s⁴¹.

The seemingly unassailable nature of Afrikaner power after 1948 allowed those in opposition to be more liberal in their defence of the 'compromises that salved the consciences of English-

⁴⁰ D. Harrison - *The White Tribe* pp 154-6

⁴¹ Harrison claims that the UP had the support of a majority of the voters in the 1958 election, although they only won 53 seats to the NP's 103. D. Harrison - *The White Tribe* p 160

speaking white South Africans'⁴² than might otherwise have been the case. The assumptions of the liberal nature of white English-speaking South Africa were never tested after 1948, and arguably it was safe to call for a greater degree of racial 'partnership' in the knowledge that such a thing could not come to pass and so threaten the lifestyle of liberals themselves. In practise, Nationalist power allowed for the preservation of the 'conservative colonial settler tradition', while for the liberals, 'the utopia of a future egalitarian South Africa of all races could be cherished and preached' without facing the possible negative consequences of such a vision⁴³.

Despite the historic image in some quarters of modern English South Africans as politically liberal, very few of the veterans became involved in opposition politics. While many expressed shock at the defeat suffered by the United Party in 1948, most turned away from any political activity in its aftermath. For the majority, even some of those who had been involved in 'Nat bashing' before the election, politics became the domain of other people, as English speakers asserted their social superiority in the face of the perceived loss of political power:

'Then the (1953) election came, but of course we

⁴² W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* p 144

⁴³ Hanf, T. 'The Freiburg Study' quoted in Adam, H. - 'The failure of political liberalism' p 264

didn't pay much attention to the politicians'⁴⁴.

'We voted for the Progressives whenever the elections came along. We were never politically active and we certainly weren't activists. We had our own ideas about things, we had our own principles. We disliked apartheid, we disliked that'⁴⁵.

The dislike of apartheid and the government was never capitalised on fully by the parliamentary opposition, however, and while thousands of veterans felt strongly enough to participate in the Torch Commando march against government policy regarding the coloured vote in the early 1950s, and later to provide sympathetic support to the Black Sash, this support was never translated into electoral success.⁴⁶

A strong argument could be made that antipathy to apartheid among the veterans was rooted principally in its strong attachment to Afrikanerdom. During the War, the pro-German stance of many leading Nationalists had completely alienated many English-speaking South Africans, who came to identify Nationalism and Afrikanerdom as pro-Nazi forces. Even prior to this, the collapse

⁴⁴ Interview: R.D. p 23

⁴⁵ Interview: C. & E.H. p 47

⁴⁶ Rogers gives examples of thousands coming out into central Johannesburg to greet the women returning from the 48 hour vigil at the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1954 - M. Rogers - *The Black Sash: the story of the South African Women's Defence of the Constitution League* (Rotonews, Johannesburg, 1956) p 40. The Torch Commando marches were very large affairs, with 10 000 estimated participants in the Cape Town march alone, *Cape Argus* 15.4.51.

of the Fusion government had underlined a much wider schism between the two main groups of the white population than had existed at any time since the outbreak of World War I⁴⁷. This split had been very clearly visible in Cape Town, with the regular organised disturbances of the imperial Noon Pause in the city centre, and the existence of a large and active pro-Nazi community at Philippi, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

Despite the lack of newspaper reporting on organised breaches of the Noon Pause, the regularity of the disturbances and the number of people who would have witnessed them must have created considerable anti-nationalist animosity amongst Cape Town's very pro-War majority population. The lingering strength of this feeling was never successfully exploited by the new opposition parties after 1948 because, firstly, the electoral system meant that local sympathies resulted in the election of only a few local MPs. If such opposition was confined to a few areas, this did not affect the government's parliamentary majority. Secondly, however, and much more damaging to sustained extra-parliamentary protest, was the simple material fact that apartheid worked basically in favour of English-speaking whites just as it worked specifically for Afrikaans-speakers. After a few years of

⁴⁷ B. Nasson - 'War opinion in South Africa, 1914' in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* vol 23, n° 2, 1995 p 269

Nationalist rule, the benefits of the system for all whites were becoming evident as job protection and influx control began to have an effect on the local economy. Perhaps paradoxically, protest against the racial system was muted by the sheer success of apartheid policy. The white population was becoming so privileged that it 'didn't dawn on us what was happening to other people'⁴⁸:

'People liked apartheid in South Africa, whites liked apartheid. Even if they worked against it. Oh yes, the majority of folks liked it, oh yes. Well it worked in their favour didn't it, it was in their best interests. It made life very easy for us, we didn't have to think about anything.'⁴⁹

It was for this reason that those post-1948 organisations which did receive considerable support from veterans, crumbled. The Torch Commando lacked the solidarity to continue beyond the United Party's defeat in 1953⁵⁰, while the Black Sash changed the emphasis of its policy from political protest to political philanthropy as the power of the government increased.

Doubtless, protests were very conspicuous and effectively organised - the Torch Commando's torchlight parades were evocative of commando and fascist parades, 'perhaps ... one last

⁴⁸ Interview: P.M. p 42

⁴⁹ Interview: J.W. pp 25-6

⁵⁰ D. Harrison - *The White Tribe* p 158

attempt to capture icons which might appeal to the mass of Afrikaans-speaking South African whites'⁵¹, while the sympathetic response to the Black Sash's symbolic vigils was strong⁵². In spite of this, however, the two organisations were not strong enough to energise a parliamentary opposition rendered impotent by a strong-willed government that pushed through its eventually successful policies.

In sum, veterans returning from the War into the political turmoil of the late 1940s, experienced great disappointment at the fall of the United Party. They had, after all, fought under the leadership of General Smuts, and had identified very strongly with his centrist policy and loyal Dominion character. Consequently, there was a feeling of helplessness amongst the veterans and a perceived inability to effect change in the country's political direction:

'We tended to accept the situation, and I suppose we felt that, 'Who are we to fight against these people?' They seemed to sweep everything before them'.⁵³

In the light of the election defeat it is not surprising that many of the veterans felt that the country they had fought for was not the same as the one to which they had returned. English-

⁵¹ W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* p 144

⁵² M. Rogers - *The Black Sash* p 40

⁵³ Interview: P.M. p 44

speaking South African political power was coming to an end at what should have been its greatest moment. Smuts, the personification of this power, was brutally dispossessed not only of his premiership, but also of his parliamentary seat. For veterans, this loss of stature was to be particularly poignant:

'General Smuts appealed to chaps to fight for freedom. There was a pro-Nazi movement here in South Africa, and when these chaps came to power it was as though they were taking away the freedom that we'd actually fought for.'⁵⁴

To adapt Keppel-Jones⁵⁵, when Smuts went, so did that war-inspired sense of freedom.

⁵⁴ Interview: P.M. p 44

⁵⁵ Keppel-Jones, A. - *When Smuts Goes: a history of South Africa from 1952-2010*. First published in 2015 (Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1949)

CHAPTER 7

'I think I settled down fairly quickly'¹:

Issues of identity

amongst veterans

¹ Interview: H.B. p 12

'A lot of them lost their jobs ... all they got was £50 and a suit, and that was that. Now you have to go and find your own way, thank you very much, you nearly died for your country, and now goodbye. What's happened? What? I mean you talk about a shell hole, or something, well that's camaraderie, not singing Auld Lang Syne or Hang the Washing on the Line. It was more than that. It was coming back to a disjointed family, some of them ... on board ship they had a board up - "Dear John, I'm sorry I can't wait I met somebody else". Hundreds, hundreds. Thank you very much. That's for fighting for your country.'²

'No, those days. We joined a crowd, we called ourselves the Torch Commando. We had little badges, and the one I remember most was we went to a place called Piketberg and Sailor Malan, the famous, you know he was a fantastic air man in the War. Sailor Malan, even though the poor bugger had Parkinson's disease and it was really serious, went in a convoy from Belsen, we drove to Piketberg, which is about 60 miles away, hoping to have an ex-servicemen's meeting. There was this one bloody pub ... from here to this wall we sat, and there was a blank space of about 10 feet and then the boere sat this side. Just watching us, waiting for some bugger to start any performance and then there would have been a real fucking war there. It so happened that nothing happened. We just sat there looking at them. We all got quietly

² Interview: G.d.J p 1

pissed. Sailor Malan went (motions) and we all drove bloody home again. Not a bloody thing happened, it was crazy. We all got there thinking ... Torch Commando, it fizzled out in no time at all ... We looked at these buggers, and we were all ex-servicemen and they weren't and we sort of looked, but it was just sort of a subtle feeling of you know, but there was no violence, there was nothing like that, nothing like that, no. Nothing.'³

³ Interview: R.D. p 9

Studies of the effects of war on those returning to society from the front have focused generally on the distance placed between the veterans and their society - in particular, the work that has been done on Vietnam veterans returning to the US in the 1960s and 1970s, a problem that was highlighted by the number of films and books about the war and its aftermath that surfaced in the 1980s.

There has not been the same amount of public interest raised about the long term effects of the Second World War on those who served in it. We occasionally see veterans in groups at D-Day and VE Day commemoration services - especially in 1995 with various fiftieth anniversary celebrations taking place - but aside from these ventures into the public eye, World War II veterans seem to have kept a fairly low profile since their return.

This is particularly true of South Africa, where the change in government in 1948 put into power several people who had a very different view of the War to the previous administration. As a result some of those who had fought in the War were removed from the central position in state planning that they might otherwise have occupied. This indifference has extended to commemoration. While the Anzac experience is openly celebrated in Australia, with a public holiday and several remembrance services throughout

the year⁴, South African veterans receive very little public recognition for the service they rendered to their country and the former British Empire.

The War nevertheless changed many of those who had taken part in it. Attitudes about racial issues, gender relations, class differences, political affiliations and many other aspects of the veterans' identity were permanently altered by their participation in the War.

The War and the demobilisation process had a deep effect on the racial attitudes of many of the veterans. In 1945, all the returning soldiers were about to fall under the apartheid system, which was to be tacitly opposed by many, but also accepted by a considerable number of the veterans. Racial differences had been present in the War. White, coloured and African soldiers had their own units, and different rates of pay. African soldiers could not carry weapons other than assegais, and were given less leave and shorter rations⁵. This differentiation was also present in the demobilisation system. White soldiers received a bigger gratuity than the other racial groups, and complaints were received that coloured soldiers were given little more than a new pair of boots and a bicycle when they returned to South Africa:

⁴ G. Bolton - *The Oxford History of Australia, vol 5: The middle way, 1942-1988* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990) p 133

⁵ J. Cock - 'Demobilisation and Democracy' p 2

'Bugger all they gave me. Eighteen pounds, that was just for clothing. Bugger all. Eighteen pounds they gave me here at the Athlone barracks'⁶.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that racial attitudes among the veterans interviewed polarised. This was not only due to the differences that had been encouraged by the organisational structures of the army, but also because of the nature of the Nationalist government after 1948, which undoubtedly made people more aware of racial differences. Contact, limited as it was, with black troops from other armies, confirmed segregationist tendencies within many of the South African troops. One informant recalls seeing a black American soldier going out with an Italian woman, and hearing one of his superiors comment:

"Hoe kan die fokken kaffir saamstap met 'n wit vrou?"
Now we'd never heard it like that, but this did seem wrong ... it was inherent, and we'd never heard of apartheid, ... we didn't know what the word meant'⁷.

Some were silckened by the strict racial separation that apartheid introduced, but felt it only when they came into direct contact with segregation: 'I always felt terrible walking across the railway station and seeing the sign there saying "Whites

⁶ Interview: R.F. pp 13-14

⁷ Interview: R.D. p 10. It is worth noting that in this extract the informant spoke in Afrikaans when making a statement which he felt would not have been spoken by an English-speaker at the time, establishing an interesting English and Afrikaner discourse.

only" ... But we weren't in any protests of any sort'⁸. In others, there surface the all-too-familiar, paternalistic views of Africans and coloureds, in which society was a much happier place when everybody's place was clearly defined:

'We were always so happy, the blacks couldn't vote but the coloureds could. We were all such good friends. We used to have such wonderful African chars and things'⁹.

This paternalism towards coloured and African members of society continued after the War. The Torch Commando marches, for example, are an extension of this attitude, where white veterans mobilised on behalf of coloured voters in order to protect their voting rights.

It is among the coloured veterans that one finds a more positive expression of racial identity. In the army, coloured soldiers were constantly made aware of the lower position they occupied due their skin. This was often not due to actual army policy, but to rules imposed by the men themselves. While the army did pay coloured soldiers much less than white troops, other more subtle forms of discrimination were practised as well:

'If you were a coloured man - it wasn't a must, but I suppose they made it a must, they had a lot of by-laws - you had to address any old blooming private who was

⁸ Interview: C. & E.H. p 44

⁹ Interview: R.D. p 18

a white man as mister, and there's no misters in the army. And like coming to a town ... you can go to any club, the British Club, the New Zealand Club, the Australian Club ... there's only one club you couldn't enter, that's the Springbok Club. There was a lot of apartheid in the army'¹⁰.

It is clear from the interview sample, therefore, that the class and race consciousness of the coloured veterans in the sample was far more likely to undergo change than it was for the white veterans. While coloured informants stressed the similarities between themselves and their white counterparts, the entire army and demobilisation machinery as well as white troops stressed the differences between the two race groups.

Coloured society was, throughout the post-War period, in a state of flux. This was augmented by the change in government which occurred in 1948: under United Party rule, coloureds were perceived to be part of a similar, 'European' civilisation to that of whites. Under the NP, this was destined to change, with the few privileges previously allowed to coloureds being reduced, as the coloured population was classed more and more with an unenfranchised black South Africa. The issues surrounding the removal of the vote (which directly affected male coloured veterans) were a further cause of this fluidity, because of the

¹⁰ Interview: J.H. p 17

rift they caused in coloured society between those who opposed the new measures and those, principally the Unity Movement, who saw themselves engaged in a larger struggle against racism, and viewed the limited franchise which had existed as divisive.

Gender relations were also thrown into greater relief by the soldiers' experiences of War and demobilisation. In almost all units of the armed forces the vast majority, if not all the troops billeted together, were men. The only contact with women that was possible for almost all male interviewees was either with nurses or with women from the areas to which they were posted.

All the men interviewed expressed how much they missed the close camaraderie that had evolved in the units in which they had served. For some, there was a brief period after the War when they were in close enough contact with other veterans to maintain friendships. Those who went to the University of Cape Town on government grants, for example, were able to recreate an exclusively male veteran's society in the 'Belsen' residences¹¹. For others, where many from the same workplace had joined up, there was a revival of the camaraderie and common masculinity felt in the forces:

¹¹ Interview: R.D. p 11

'We all came back as a group. That was a remarkable experience because the camaraderie there was absolutely magnificent... Everyone had millions of stories to tell and jokes and incidences(sic)'¹².

Within this braggart male culture that was established and enjoyed during the War, there has to be some explanation for the contradictions posed for veterans by those who suffered from shell-shock, nightmares and so on. It was not befitting a group who could sit in the office and joke about the experience of fighting to include those who had been driven to the edges of sanity by the same experience. Those who did suffer negative psychological effects from the War, were therefore presented as 'not the right sort of chap'. One sufferer was described as:

'A real goody-goody type ... he was emotionally upset, but he was an emotionally upset prone case anyway ... He was a victim simply because he wasn't stable enough'¹³.

Similarly the incidence of shell-shock among American troops was explained by the differences in the way US soldiers had been brought up, and the way they were treated in the army:

'America is a matriarchy, therefore they grew up in this emotional "Mummy loves you" sort of thing, whereas I grew up with a stiff upper lip, British Empire. My Dad was a super guy ... but I don't think

¹² Interview: H.B. p 62

¹³ Interview: B.R. p 33

he ever displayed emotion. Also we were disciplined during the War, we made our chaps shave every day, South Africans washed in cold water, bathed in the bloody river, no matter how icy it was, to keep clean. Americans were cosseted. They had free razor blades, free everything, they had better trucks, better everything, and they were coddled, protected. Emotionally I'm quite sure we were all detached in a way from what was going on'¹⁴.

Thus you were insulated from psychological suffering because of a level of emotional detachment as a barrier to painful and socially unacceptable emotional displays.

As a result of the predominantly male society of the forces, much of the contact between men and women during the War took place on a very forced, unnatural basis. Many of the men took prostitutes,¹⁵ while for others who wanted female company for a night, there were always the WRENS, whose barracks seem to have operated like an escort agency. One of the interviewees was sent there by his CO when he asked where he could get some 'European' female company for a film and dinner. He reported to the barracks and told the WREN duty officer what he wanted. He was told to sit down:

'"All the girls who wanted to go out would come down. Just go up to one of them and ask them". And they came

¹⁴ Interview: B.R. p 34

¹⁵ Interview: J.E. p 23

down and I went out with this girl ... I just had to sign her out, like an issue to me, with the promise that I'd have her back by 23:59¹⁶.

With such a utilitarian view of women being actively encouraged by the army, and given the closeness of shared male company for an extended period, it is hardly surprising that a fairly extensive assertive male culture grew up amongst soldiers, which was to continue after they returned to Cape Town.

This culture was expressed in many forms during the War. For some there were the high-spirited moments, related in the manner of public-school type 'japes', like the Air Force squadron that stole all the instruments from a band playing in Cairo¹⁷, or another that raided an Italian village in search of alcohol¹⁸.

For others, the treatment of women, and in particular of nurses, was symptomatic of the effects of living in a primarily male society. Servicewomen were not only available to the male troops in formal situations like the WREN instance described above. For the most part, male-female contact for soldiers was informal, where men would look for female company for an evening or over a period of leave. While the full extent of this contact can only

¹⁶ Interview: J.E. p 30

¹⁷ Interview: E.I. p 12

¹⁸ Interview: R.D. p 21

be guessed at as many of the male interviewees were reluctant to speak about contact with women in any detail, there is a casual air about the stories that do come out which gives an insight into gender relations in the forces.

One informant, for example, was driving along behind an officer in Italy, when the officer 'found two nurses at the side of the road.' The officer commandeered the informant's jeep in order to give them, and his ego, a lift, stopping for a picnic 'and all the rest' on his way to Rome¹⁹. While the implications of this story are partly about a loosening of sexual mores during the War, it can also be seen that the officer in question considered the nurses to be available for whatever form of entertainment he required of them. The nurses provided one part of life in the army for male soldiers in much the same way that the mess hall provided food. This is not to say that the casual relationships which were established in the War were not reciprocal in some way. In the incident cited above, for example, the jeep provided a lift and uncomplicated sex for the nurses involved.

In Cape Town during the War there was a contradiction in the ways in which women were viewed. This stems from the city's nature both as a port and as a home which many had left to fight. Publicly, women were viewed in their traditional war-time role

¹⁹ Interview: B.G. p 24

as heroines of the home front, and workers in hospitals. Therefore, while men were busy performing 'great acts of destruction':

'The women are consecrating (sic) their energies on the care and nurture of life, improving conditions for the men, looking after their health and comfort, caring for the sick and wounded, saving the women and children as far as possible from the horrors of the War'²⁰.

The other side of women's position in Cape Town society originates in the attitudes of the many soldiers who came through the city either on leave or on their way to the front. Troops on shore leave seem to have been primarily concerned with enjoying themselves as much as possible. Dances were organised for these soldiers by the Women's Auxiliary Service (SAWAS), and here a very similar view of women seems to have prevailed to that in the active forces. While the dances for the officers at Kelvin Grove, mentioned earlier, were exclusively for whites, those held at the club behind the City Hall were integrated. It was seemingly not unknown for the women who went to these dances to entertain the soldiers to fall pregnant:

'There was a lot of War babies. Well, there wasn't an Immorality Act in those days - a girl could walk with

²⁰ Mrs Pollock, Pres. of the National Women's Council in a speech to the Sunday Service meeting for December 1940. In Secretary's letter for 5.1.1941 meeting p 5 in 'Our Boys' Vol. 1

a white man and it was alright'²¹.

The casual and at times proprietary attitude towards women evident in the forces was to continue after the War. Many of the male soldiers met their wives soon after their return to South Africa. It is here that difficulty was experienced by the male veterans, adjusting from the masculinity of comradeship which had developed during the War, to the more 'domestic manhood' which was expected of them after 1945.

Like finding a job, finding a partner was something usually arranged through a contact. Male friends were instrumental in finding girlfriends for the returning soldiers, and in organising the first meeting between the couple - consent for the arrangement of the meeting does not seem to have been a concern:

'My brother-in-law introduced me ... you see all the girls I knew were either engaged or married or something. He said, 'I've got a little cutie in mind for you'. So I said, 'Well who is this paragon of virtue?' And he told me ... to cut a long story short by the end of the year we were engaged and got married.'²²

Here is expressed an assumption of control over the social

²¹ Mrs B.J. interview quoted in D.S. Lewis - 'Different sides of the same coin' p 45

²² Interview: B.R. pp 21-22

activities of women, which may be a direct result of pre-War 'partnering' attitudes towards women which were then institutionalised in the forces. This superiority was, however, at times fragile. This is shown by men expressing a need for comfort from women when troubled by their memories of the War²³. There were also other ways in which the perceived commanding social position occupied by men could simply fade away:

'One chap who was wounded saw himself as damaged goods. He'd been a womaniser ... It was strange that he should have been wounded because he was one of the few chaps I've ever known who was disgusted at the thought of somebody maimed taking a girl out. I remember one night when a wounded chap came in he was disgusted, you know ... He was badly affected by it, emotionally upset. He never married. Became a drinker.'²⁴

The emotional and physical scars the War left on those who fought were either to be healed by, or hidden from, women. In both cases the existence of such traumas radically affected the individual's self-esteem and their relationship with women.

For the women in the forces, the construct of gender with which they were faced was nothing particularly new but rather an exacerbated form of what had existed in society before they left.

²³ Interview: H.B. p 60

²⁴ Interview: B.R. p 33

This difference was seemingly carried forward into civilian life at the end of the War.

Two of the women interviewed for this thesis began their accounts of the War by outlining in some detail what their husbands had done, as if to legitimise their quite outstanding war careers by placing them in a subordinate position to those of their husbands²⁵. The other two women interviewed brought their husbands to the interview to give their own accounts, and so place the woman's role in the forces in the context of what the men were doing²⁶. This subordination continued into the demobilisation period - the Department of Social Welfare and Demobilisation measured the stress that women were considered to have suffered during their time in the forces in terms of the worry they experienced for their husbands and loved ones:

'The additional strain and anxiety as to the well-being of their men folk has had its effect on a goodly number of women ex-volunteers'²⁷.

All the women interviewed returned from the War and entered the domestic sphere:

'I went back to Paarl in '45, met my husband at the end of 1945, married him in 1947, and that's the end

²⁵ Interviews: O.P. pp 1-4; H.S. pp 8-10

²⁶ Interviews: E. & C.H.; J.W. p 25

²⁷ Letter: DSDC (Women's Committee) Paarl to Secretary, Department of Social Welfare and Demobilisation, P.E., 1.9.1945. (CA: SWP 15 ref SE 16)

of my career'.²⁸

This subordination continued in spite of the very remarkable careers that some of the women in the forces had had for the previous five or six years. One informant had been a despatch rider in Kenya, a glider pilot and nurse, before going out to the Far East, where she ended up in sole command of 11 000 men in POW camps after they were liberated from Japanese control at the end of the War²⁹. Others had operated the coastal guns around the Cape Town harbours³⁰ or had been nurses in Baragwanath and other hospitals around the country³¹.

Having played a very active, and often very unusual role in the War, it was women, more than any other group of veterans who were expected to be able to return to what society viewed as their proper role without any fuss:

'OP: There was really no outlet for me ... I belonged to the book club ... and for the rest I had the children. I did a bit of embroidery, and I learned to play the piano.

I: And your stunt diving, gliding, motor-cycling?

²⁸ Interview: J.W. p 7

²⁹ Interview: O.P. The information supplied about control of the prison camps after the War was supported with documentation and commendations which remain in the informant's possession.

³⁰ Interview J.W. pp 5-6

³¹ Interview: C. & E.H

OP: Everything, everything went.'³²

While men were able to express the changes that had occurred in their lives while they had been away through changes in jobs, careers and lifestyles, women returned and were expected to pick up quietly where they had left off. Women veterans were also expected, despite the horrors that they had witnessed in hospital wards and the misery of POW camps, to calm their husbands' nerves when nightmares came to them:

'I'd wake in the night and shout and go on and she'd say, "What's wrong with you? It's OK, I'm here".'³³.

Despite the reliance of male veterans on women in such situations, and the new roles that women had played in both civilian and army society during the War, they remained socially and economically subordinate after the War. The return to pre-War domestic spheres disadvantaged the female informants greatly. It was the forces' experience of gender allocation and the sharp relief into which gender relations were thrown during the War, coupled with society's existing expectations of women, that had fostered assumptions of the inferior status of women. In an army where women were offered for entertainment to soldiers and where their duties were mostly in support of the fighting men as

³² Interview: O.P. pp 26-27

³³ Interviews: O.P. p 3; H.B. p 52

nurses, it was to be expected that considerable gender inequality would be evident in the post-War period. The act of joining the armed forces had not really altered the way in which women were viewed by society.

In terms of political identity, many informants expressed the feeling that there were two countries within South Africa at the end of the War. One, led by the National Party, was largely Afrikaans, while the other still looked to metropolitan Britain for social and political inspiration. The final concern of this chapter is an investigation of this 'national identity' among the informants. It almost goes without saying that those who went away to the War were largely pro-British, and the alignment of the Ossewa Brandwag with the Axis forces served only to widen the split between the English and Afrikaans sectors of white society.

Many of the informants were very keen to emphasise their links with Britain. One informant even knew his grandfather's address in Lancashire before he had come to South Africa³⁴. It was much more common, however, to hear the usual English-speaking South African count of generations: 'I'm a fourth generation South African'³⁵. This incantation has a dual purpose, identifying ties with both South Africa and Britain in a unique way,

³⁴ Interview: R.F. p 1

³⁵ Interview: D.A. p 2

establishing the ambiguous hierarchy of whose family was here first alongside that of who has the closest links with Britain.

Ties with Britain were particularly strong at the end of the War and animosity against nationalist Afrikaners, the majority of whom had not gone to fight, was also at a high point. The visit of King George VI in 1947, accompanied by the whole royal family, is remembered as 'one of the great events in Cape Town after the War'³⁶, and informants still claim to remember what Princess Elizabeth said to them at the ball in the City Hall³⁷.

While a large section of Cape Town's white society felt a strengthening of links with Britain during the War, local enmities were increasing. There was support for the Axis war effort in some sections of Cape Town, with the Ossewa Brandwag's much publicised opposition to entering the War on the Allied side not the only example of this.

Several interviewees had come into contact with Philippi during the War and were aware of how strongly its farmer community felt about South Africa's participation in the conflict.

'We were very much English orientated our side of the family. But then we had the other side of the family that married into Germans. This Cape Flats, down here,

³⁶ Interview: J.W. p 27

³⁷ Interview: J.W. p 27

the Philippi area, that was a predominantly German area, and I remember even after I was in the Air Force, I was forbidden to visit my relations down here in uniform. They had swastikas painted on the stable doors, and the radio was always turned to Zeesen, that was old Lord Haw-Haw's station.'³⁸

For yet others, contact with the residents of Philippi were often more violent than this:

'The Ossewa Brandwag, jees, the number of times I was beaten to a bloody pulp by these bastards. We used to go on shebeen raids down there. We had to wear our khaki overalls and we were issued with these bloody brown takkies, they were usually about ten sizes too big. And we'd go and raid the shebeens there. We'd break one, drink one, break one, drink one, and then we'd march back to the bloody camp past this Afrikaans hall. And these bastards would jump out. I remember this one guy there, he put his two feet on the ends of my huge takkies and held them, and just punched me and punched me.'³⁹

In Cape Town itself there had been violence around the issue of the Noon Pause, which was sometimes disrupted by organised anti-War groups walking up Adderley Street instead of standing still. The crowd's reaction was sometimes quite violent:

'The students would come in from Stellenbosch and would go in amongst the crowd, purposely bumping people out of the way. People used to get worked up

³⁸ Interview: J.E. p 9

³⁹ Interview: R.D. p 19

about it.'⁴⁰

At the end of the War it was still the English-speaking sector of white society that was politically dominant. This position bred complacency, and the nationalist Afrikaners were not seen as a particularly serious threat to English-speaking social and political superiority.

All the informants saw themselves as being 'anti-Nat', Smuts men and women, and felt a strong sense of belonging to the British Empire or at least some form of Commonwealth⁴¹. There are obviously questions that can be raised about the validity of some of the memories around this topic - most claimed to have been in a pub somewhere in the country when somebody said that the result would 'put the country back 40 years'⁴² - but it is certainly clear that all felt a disillusionment with the outcome of the election, and there is almost a sense of betrayal evident in the interviews.

Opposition to the new government was not terribly effective. Some veterans worked for the United Party, and others took part in the Torch Commando rally in Cape Town in 1951 protesting against the

⁴⁰ Interview: J.E. p 10

⁴¹ Interview: R.D. p 8

⁴² Interview: H.B. p 65

proposed removal of coloureds from the voters' roll. Torch Commando members were also responsible for organising the violent disruption of Nationalist meetings, although not many interviewees were involved to this extent⁴³. One informant was even invited to join an Ossewa Brandwag-style sabotage unit, although this organisation was never put into operation⁴⁴.

The veterans' inability to organise properly against the Nationalist government displays the total failure of the Cape Liberal Tradition at this point. All were pro-Smuts, and supported some vague notion of a British social and constitutional system. The result of the 1948 election elicited feelings of disillusionment, as the country that came into being was 'not the one we had fought for'⁴⁵. Many of the informants had gone to war because it was the natural thing to do, because it reaffirmed their position in the dominant social group in the country, and because of some fidelity remaining from family ties to Britain. Just after the end of the War, this ease was gone. Smuts had lost his seat, and the new government comprised some of those who had been interned for their support of the Germans during the War. The veterans now focused rather on maintaining their social status, and detached themselves to a large extent

⁴³ Interview: H.B. p 66

⁴⁴ Interview: S.D.M p 11

⁴⁵ Interview: J.W. p 30

from political affairs, most doing nothing between elections⁴⁶:

'They'd been soldiers and they knew discipline. They took part in the Torch Commando (march), but the rest of the politics was left to the politicians. People started getting on with their daily lives, you know'⁴⁷.

The War played a crucial role in the formation and crystallisation of the identities of those who took part in it. Differences between race and gender groups were exaggerated in the army compared to civilian life. This exaggeration had an important effect on the way the different groups interacted for some time after the War. Many soldiers found it hard to settle down in Cape Town which had, according to all of them, changed very little in their absence, when they had changed so much.

Awareness of racial identity had been strengthened amongst the veterans, particularly the coloured soldiers who had faced racism both in the forces and in the demobilisation system. For many of the white soldiers, however, a strong ideological sense of racial identity was still lacking, although there was a very strong negative sense of identity - many expressed an awareness of not being black, of not being coloured, and viewed themselves, in some way or other, as racially superior to these two groups.

⁴⁶ Interview: J.W. p 25

⁴⁷ Interview: S.W. p 25

The War also transformed the soldiers' own constructions of gender. Women's roles in the War were usually supportive, and the main reason men came into contact with women was for entertainment or in hospitals. Some army structures encouraged an objectified social projection of women by offering them bordello-style for a night out. Women were also clearly subordinate in other, less formal contacts. In stark contrast to this projection of women and their social role was the masculine camaraderie that had grown among the male troops, which was carried into post-War society through continued contact, and through the veterans' organisations, which have, since 1948, remained on the fringes of the society in which they are situated because of the political distance between their members and the government.

Politically, the act of going to war strengthened identity within the then dominant political and social group in Cape society, an English-speaking, pro-British group. Many of the veterans were bewildered when political power was removed from this group in 1948, but the identity with that group was for most too strong to break, and so politics was 'left to the politicians', and they had to satisfy themselves with maintaining their social status in Cape society.

Obviously, then, the Second World War did have a drastic effect on the way in which those who took part in it viewed themselves and their surroundings. This was particularly true of all the informants from this sample who were very young on leaving for the War, and so spent some formative years in army society. After the experiences of the War, the return to Cape Town and civilian life was eased by the maintenance of many of the social structures developed in the forces.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

The scheme devised by the South African government for the reintegration of soldiers into society was 'ambitious and imaginative'¹. The government's promises to soldiers aimed to meet the needs of every individual, both in financial and social terms. Jobs were to be found for all ex-volunteers, houses made available for those who did not already own property, and cash provided to ease initial steps into society and to give the veterans an opportunity to make large purchases. Artisans were to be given tools, university students were to have their fees paid and to receive some maintenance. Given the numbers of soldiers involved in this process, it is not surprising that the 'Soldier's Charter' failed to fulfil the hopes that the government had for its success.

Gibbs and others have acknowledged that the demobilisation machinery was 'discriminatory and flawed'² - a point which both she and Cock use as evidence to prove that the system was too ambitious to be fully achieved³. They both claim that the clearest signs of the failure of the demobilisation process in South Africa are to be found in its discriminatory nature. It must be pointed out, however, that the machinery was set up to discriminate along lines of race and gender, and in doing so it

¹ Harry Lawrence, Minister of Social Welfare and Demobilisation. *House of Assembly Debates*, vol. 57, 1946, col. 7520.

² K. Gibbs - 'Demobilisation after World War II' p 62

³ J. Cock - 'Demobilisation and democracy' pp 2-3

cannot be judged to have failed. The internal policies of the government discriminated along lines of race and gender and it is not surprising, therefore, that under the special circumstances of demobilisation, this should continue.

Gibbs and Cock are correct, however, in asserting that the demobilisation system envisaged by the government was too large for the state's resources. The failure of the process is to be found where the planned level of assistance was not available to those to whom it had been promised. There were many ex-soldiers who did not receive the gratuities they were entitled to because they did not know that they had to apply for them, while others did not get tools, jobs, or the training which they required to be rehabilitated into civilian society.

The system also discriminated in areas which were outside the socially accepted parameters of race and gender. Rank played an important role in determining the nature of benefits which ex-volunteers received. As was seen previously, privates were often treated very differently from officers in the demobilisation centres. While the infantry private who wanted tools was refused them, an officer was given a sum of two thousand pounds to remove his family to Britain⁴. According to the government's regulations, both were within their rights to make the requests

⁴ Interview: G.d.J. p 34

that they did, and both should have been given what they wanted; the demobilisation system, however, relied upon the impartiality of the staff of the DSDC offices, most of whom were officers⁵. The officers who were dispensing the government's funds were sometimes very suspicious of the motives of those applying for assistance - one of the interviewees who was on the board of a DSDC office claims that he used to 'tear a strip' off the men who came to him with what he considered excessive or unnecessary requests⁶. Under such a system it is hardly surprising that 'other ranks' fared worse during the demobilisation period. It was generally the officers who were aware that they had to apply for gratuities, that they were entitled to housing and assistance in training, university education and in seeking employment. This distinction survived to an extent across race and gender barriers - the higher ranks of female and 'non-white' troops interviewed received the highest level of benefits, although they lacked the knowledge of gratuities possessed by white male officers⁷.

For the majority of returning soldiers, however, such issues did not affect their elective perceptions of the government after they were demobilised. They returned to an economy that was very strong and in which employment was relatively easy to find - so

⁵ Interview: S.W. p 13

⁶ Interview: S.W. p 13

⁷ See for examples interviews: J.W. p 32; R.F. p 12; O.P. p 16

much so that changing jobs if conditions were unsuitable was extremely common⁸.

The strength of the economy, however, was not the only reason for the regular changes of employment by the veterans. As maintained in Chapter Five of this study, such changes were one of the few avenues open for expressing the personal destabilisation which wartime experiences had caused, as expressions of personal emotions, especially from men, were not considered socially acceptable in the pro-British middle class atmosphere of Cape Town where social mores were based loosely on what was considered acceptable in the metropolitan centre.

This left very few opportunities for male veterans to express the more disturbing aspects of their wartime experiences and their inability to readjust fully to civilian society. Thus a veteran who still has nightmares about his experiences as a prisoner of war, and who was reduced to tears during the relating of his oral testimony, claimed that he had 'no trouble really settling in, there were no problems'⁹. Under such circumstances, it is in areas such as the very common dissatisfaction with civilian employment that difficulties in readjusting to life in Cape Town are to be discerned.

⁸ Interviews: B.R. p 21; R.D. p 14; C. & E.H. p 34

⁹ Interview: H.B. p 71

The War was crucial in redefining the identities of those who took part in it. Differences between race and gender groups were exaggerated in the army when compared to civilian life.

Awareness of racial identity had been strengthened among the veterans by the prevailing attitudes of the 1940s and by participation in the War. This was especially true for coloured veterans who faced both official and personal discrimination daily in the forces, and who returned to face discrimination again during demobilisation.

Despite the claims of observers and historians, the veterans did not form a political force that posed any challenge to either the United Party or the Nationalist governments. Claims that the dissatisfaction of ex-volunteers unable to find work, threatened by African urbanisation during their absence and unhappy with their treatment upon demobilisation were, in part, responsible for the downfall of Smuts¹⁰ are not accurate for Cape Town veterans. The sample used for this study did not reveal any such sentiments and were, as has been stated, all strong supporters of Smuts and his policies. Nonetheless, after the Nationalist election victory in 1948, the strength of this support for Smuts was never effectively mobilised into long-term political

¹⁰ See, for example, P. Furlong - *Between Crown and Swastika* p 238; H. Suzman - *In No Uncertain Terms* p 16, and; W. Beinart - *Twentieth Century South Africa* pp 130-1

opposition.

The greatest disappointment for the veterans who were interviewed was that the society which they had fought to protect was not maintained upon their return. All identified themselves very strongly with Britain and with the stratum of Cape society that counted closeness to Britain as a token of social acceptance. Their position within the social and political hierarchy was, as far as they were concerned, guaranteed by the Allied victory in the War. The inability of the United Party to convert this victory into political power was central to the disempowerment of veterans as a political group - once the National Party was in power it paid little attention to the complaints of veterans. While the veterans concentrated, like much of the rest of English-speaking society in the Cape, on maintaining a perceived social superiority, they nevertheless felt bitter about the loss of political hegemony and the destruction of the political structures for which they retrospectively felt they had fought. The National Party was seen to be 'taking away the freedom that we'd actually fought for'¹¹. Once they were forced into opposition most of the veterans removed their attention away from political matters. For many, the Nationalists were powerful enough to force veterans to turn away from the frequent disappointments of active opposition: they 'swept everything

¹¹ Interview: P.M. p 44

before them, how could we stop them?'¹².

The veterans interviewed for this study were deeply affected by their experiences during the War. For the majority, difficulties were set aside as they tried to return to a normal life in civilian society. For some, however, negative memories of the War and demobilisation will never go away. Cock and Gibbs' assertions that the demobilisation process favoured white males may well be true, but they fail to acknowledge not only that the system did not achieve what was intended, but also that the system never really anticipated the problems that the veterans would face upon their return.

The only channels through which veterans were able to express the changes that had occurred in their lives were the veterans' organisations. These were of little real political value as the state neglected the overall interests of World War II veterans. The public recognition that veterans in other ex-Dominions (such as Australia and New Zealand) receive was, and still is, denied to those in South Africa. This can be attributed primarily to the historical difference of opinion between the veterans, (who prized their 'Empire values') and the Nationalist government about South Africa's participation in the War.

¹² Interview: S.W. p 25

In Cape Town there are no regular veterans' parades and Armistice Day is acknowledged only by a small wreath-laying ceremony. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day ensured, at last, some public acclaim for the veterans, although government involvement in the festivities was once again restrained, tempered by years of neglect of veterans' issues.

The effectiveness of the veterans' organisations in other issues related to the treatment of veterans was also limited by the attitude of government - the South African Legion is still engaged in a struggle over veterans' pensions, for which many veterans are ineligible. The National Party victory in 1948 ensured that public recognition, commemoration and remembrance of the events of the War were not enthusiastically supported. The experiences of the veterans during the War and upon their return to South Africa have become part of a 'hidden history' as a result of this process.

This means that there is much scope for further research about the experiences of veterans. Comparative studies into demobilisation in the various urban areas of South Africa, investigations into the relative post-War economic positions of veterans across lines of race, gender and rank, extensive comparisons with the experiences of demobilisation in other Dominions, and further examination of some of the issues raised

in this study would begin to fill some of the gaps left by the neglect of this subject. Perhaps fresh impetus will be given to such research by the process of demobilisation that took place in South Africa as returning Mkhonto weSizwe and Apla soldiers were rehabilitated into society, and by the celebrations of the anniversary of VE Day and other World War II landmarks.

Most South African troops were disappointed during the post-War period: they fought for the maintenance of British supremacy in the Empire and of a pro-British system at home. Back home, politically disempowered and socially distanced, they failed to find what they considered to be their niche in South African society. While the veterans' societies have provided some outlet for the needs of the ex-volunteers, their position on the fringes of society has further ensured their alienation. While many believe there is new hope of recognition and recompense as a result of the dispensation that will be made to MK veterans¹³, most have decided that what they consider to be the most important contribution they ever made to society has been ignored, and that their sacrifices in terms of youth, innocence and life have been overlooked:

¹³ Interview: S.W. p 25. The dispensation to be made to MK and Apla veterans was a common thread through all the veterans' associations meetings I attended, where members were hopeful of gaining some benefit from the forthcoming demobilisation.

'I spent the greater part of my youth there, from twenty-one to twenty-five I was in the army. While it was only four years, I certainly matured enough to have lost my youth.'¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview: S.M. p 24

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(Some of the informants did not wish to have their full names printed, I have therefore used initials throughout the paper for all of them. This list gives Wartime and main post-War occupation.)

- D.A. - Air Force pilot. Post-War: lay minister.
- H.B. - 2nd Division anti-aircraft gunner, captured at Tobruk. Post-War: draughtsman for Cape Town City Council
- R.D. - Air Force mechanic. Post-War: salesman
- J.E. - Air Force armourer. Post-War: accountant for the Cape Town City Council
- R.F. - Served on a Royal Navy minesweeper. Post-War: deck hand, teacher, rising to headmaster
- B.G. - Mechanic with the 6th Division. Post-War: mechanic
- C.H. - Air Force pilot. Post-War: clerk. (2 interviews)
- E.H. - Nurse at Baragwanath. Post-War: Housewife, volunteer nurse. (2 interviews)
- J.H. - Cape Corps, served in Western Desert. Post-War: stevedore, clerk.
- R.H. - 2nd Division infantry. Post-War: City Council Roads Department employee.
- E.I. - 2nd Division anti-aircraft gunner, captured at Tobruk. Post-War: owner of building supplies firm.

G.d.J - Free Dutch Forces infantry. Post-War: Artist

P.M. - Air Force pilot. Post-War: missionary and Anglican minister.

R.M. - 2nd Division Anti-Aircraft officer. Captured at Tobruk. Post-War: Jeweller

S.Ma. - Air-Force pilot. Post-War: City Council Planning Department employee.

S.M. - 2nd Division anti-aircraft gunner, captured at Tobruk - escaped in Italy, 1943. Post-War: Personal Assistant to the Administrator of the Cape Province

O.P. - Female despatch rider, nurse, glider pilot. Post-War: married in India, housewife.

B.R. - 6th Division field artillery, served mainly in Italy. Post-War: businessman - various concerns.

B.Ru. - Royal Navy Captain. Post-War: businessman.

H.S. - Nurse, served in Kenya and the Western Desert. Post-War: Housewife, chair of the Ex-Servicewomen's League, Cape Town.

J.W. - Female gunner at Simonstown Battery. Post-War: worked in a building society until marrying, thereafter a housewife. (2 interviews)

S.W. - 2nd Division, captured at Tobruk. Post-War: Banker, rising to bank manager. (2 interviews)

Also used: interview by H. Villa-Vicencio with D. Neethling.